FABLED KINGDOM BOOK 1

FABLED KINGDOM

1

QUEENIE CHAN

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VERSION 1.2

FABLED KINGDOM

BOOK I

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IMPORTANT:

'Fabled Kingdom' is an on-going story. The story is told as a single story over 3 books, with the option to continue the story with another 3 book arc.

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IN ODD WE TRUST
ODD IS ON OUR SIDE
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BOY'S BOOK OF POSITIVE QUOTATIONS

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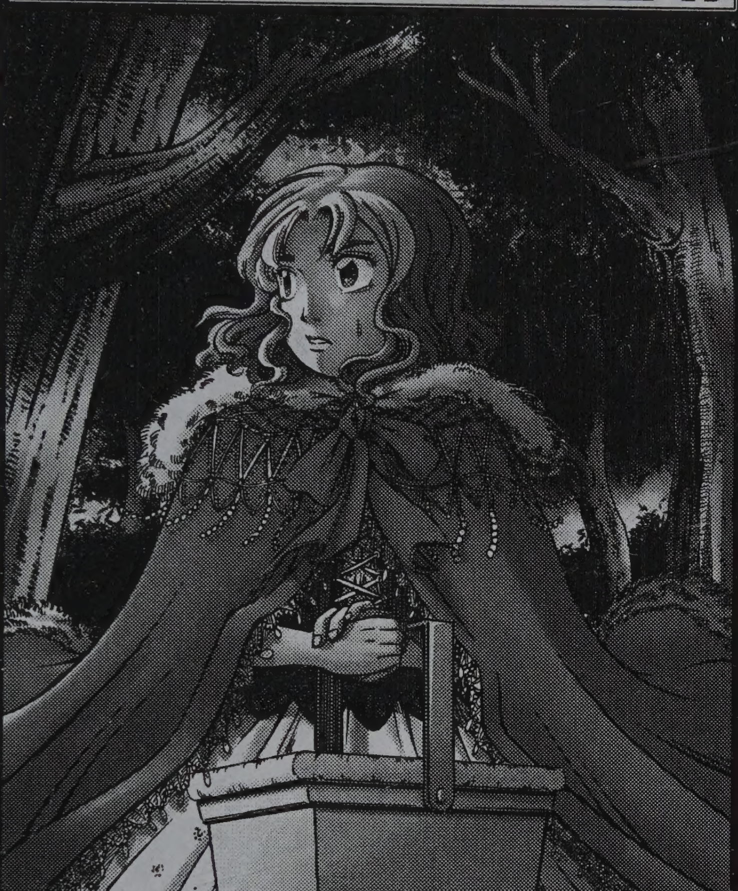
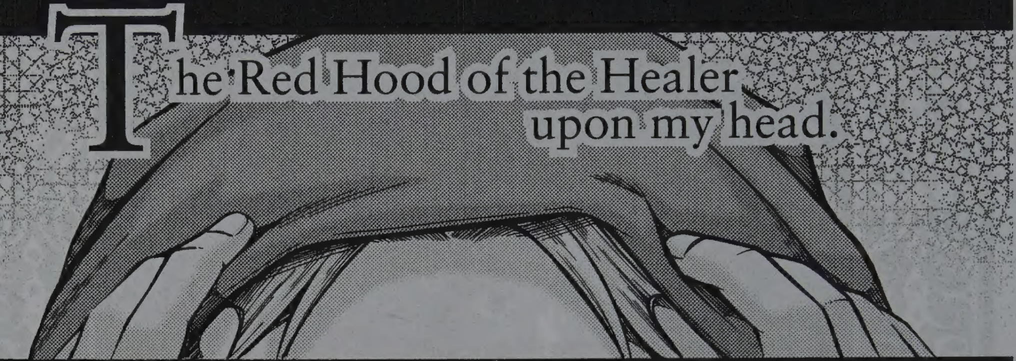
~ To all my friends and family ~



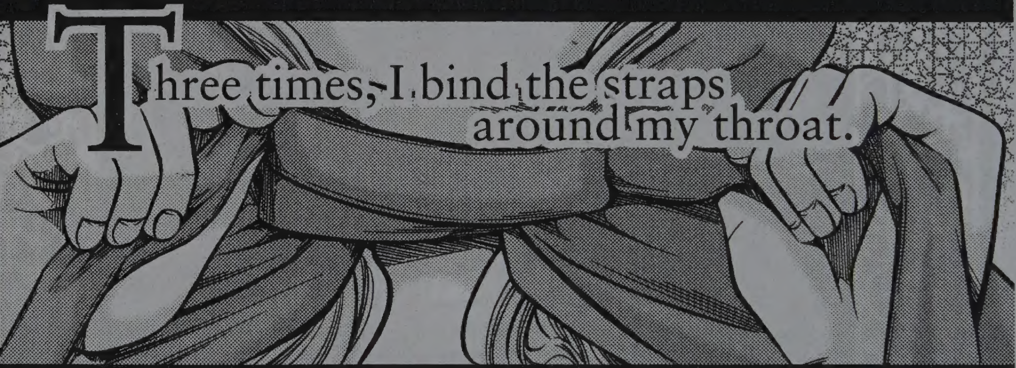
I: THE WOLF IN THE WOODS

BY QUEENIE CHAN



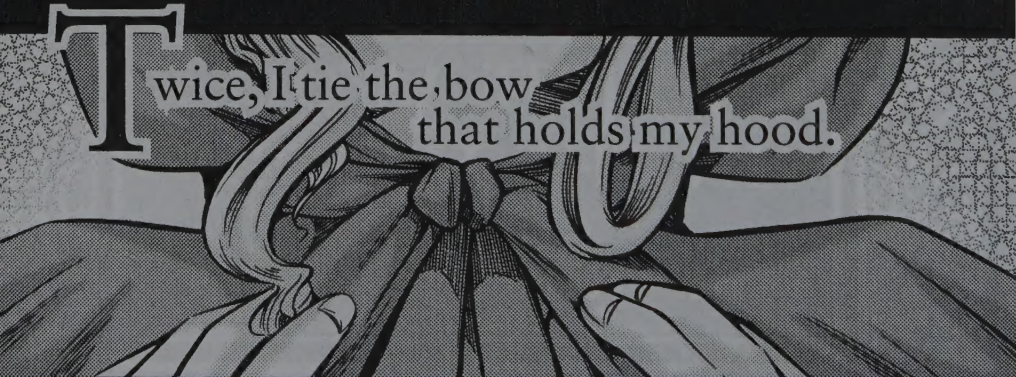
The Red Hood of the Healer
upon my head.

Red for blood—my own and that of those I save.



Three times, I bind the straps
around my throat.

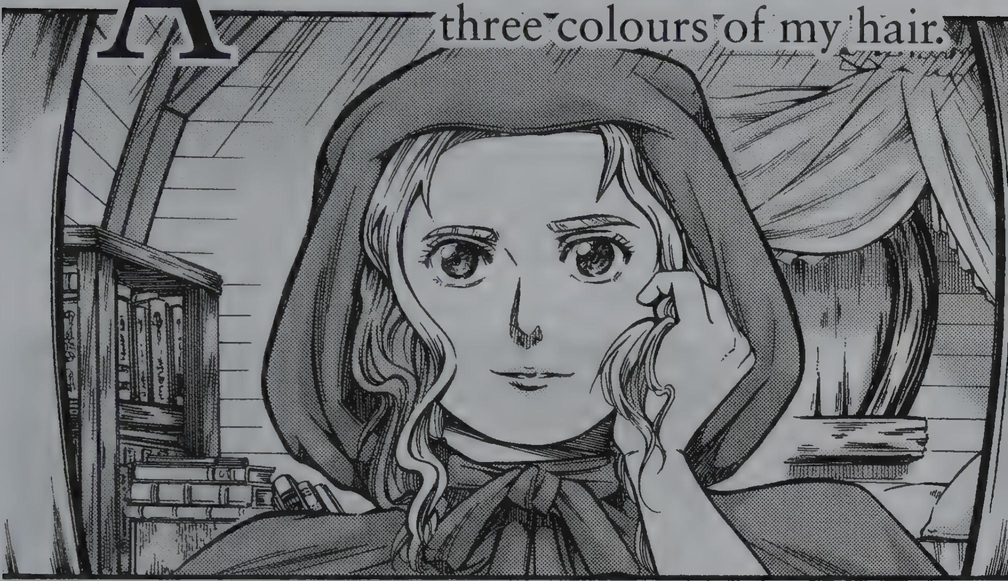
Once for birth, once for life, and once for death.



Twice, I tie the bow
that holds my hood.

The first for love, the last for loss.

And gold, silver and bronze are the three colours of my hair.



Kissed by the sun, the moon and the stars.

Celsia stared at the mirror, studying the soft folds of the red hood framing her face. She gave her reflection an impish wink. This was a familiar ritual. She would don her red hood, recite her 'Healer's Vows', then secretly change the last two lines into a whimsical reference to her hair. She found it strangely gratifying. It helped her keep some distance from the sobering words.

A stray wisp of hair escaped her hood, and she tucked it back in. Her hair was a constant source of irritation, especially when she was younger. It was the same leafy brown colour as her eyes, but with streaks of white and yellow, making her the target of jeers from some of the other children. *I was born with it!* was her stock reply these days, whenever anyone deemed to ask.

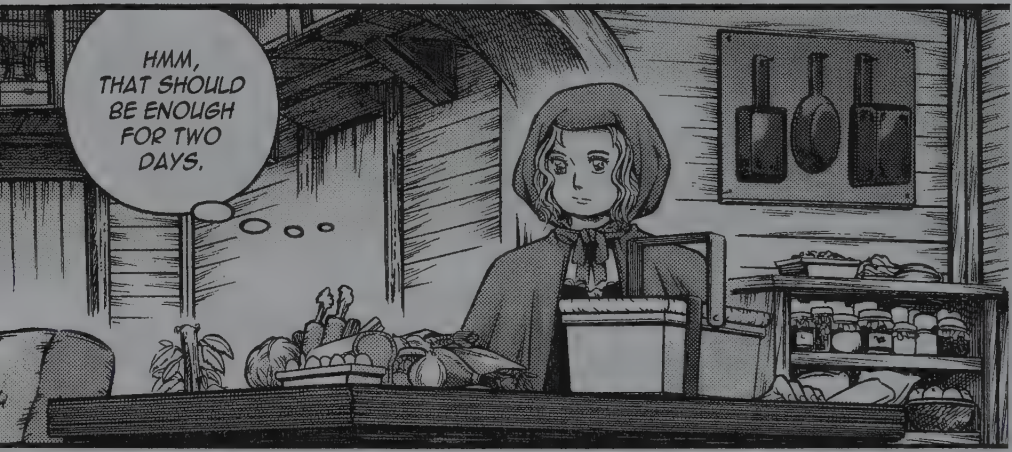
'Chameleon hair,' her grandmother once said. 'Tri-coloured hair for the three-fold path you shall walk.'

Celsia had laughed at that first comment, picturing a rambunctious trio of colour-changing lizards nesting on the top of her head. She didn't understand the second half, but it still brought her some small measure of comfort. Grandmother Penny had spoken it with such sagacity, it seemed that Great Things were destined just around the corner.

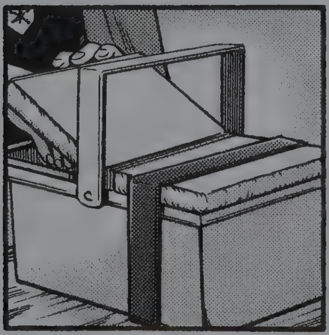
If only it were so. She was training to become a healer in the Five Shires, a cluster of small, insignificant villages along the Southern Ranges of Fableton. 'Great Things' would have to wait.

Celsia gave her reflection one last look, then got up and headed into the living area. An archway led into the kitchen, where her hamper and the food she had laid out earlier were waiting.

Her eyes swept over the little pile, and she did a quick mental checklist. There were fresh sticks of carrots, cucumbers, and celery, bundled next to a loaf of soft white bread. Beside it sat a head of lettuce, a chunk of smoked ham, and half a dozen eggs from Hetty's hen-house. There were also five salted carps the Birch family from Rivershire had sent as payment.


HMM, THAT SHOULD BE ENOUGH FOR TWO DAYS.

I can pick some mushrooms and berries in the forest later, Celsia thought, as she reached for her Special Hamper. It was a plain, simple basket, the one she always carried with her to Grandmother's house.



Her grandmother had claimed it was a family heirloom when she gave it to Celsia on her tenth birthday.

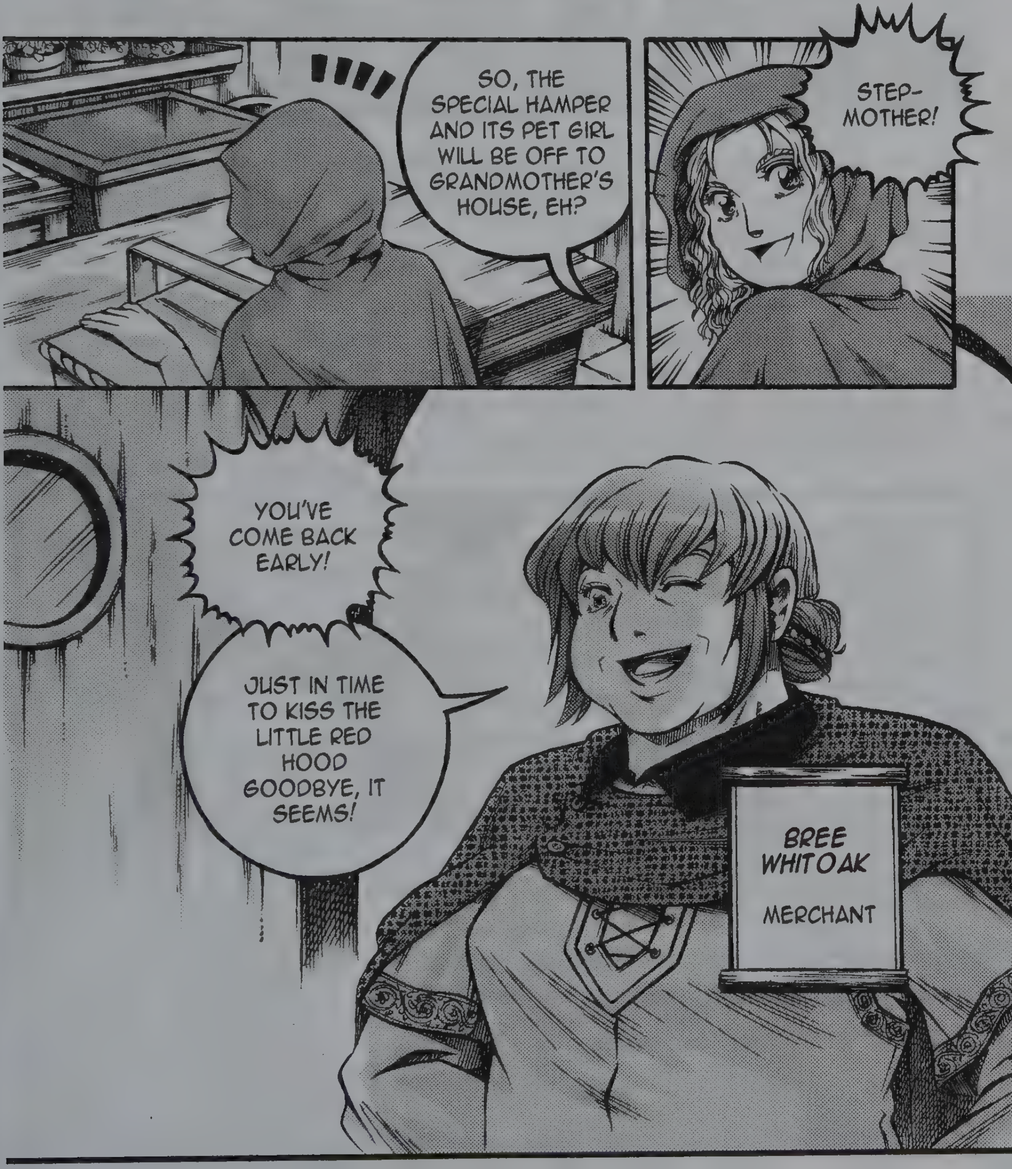
'This has been in your family for generations,' she had said. 'You must treasure it, and carry it with you always.'

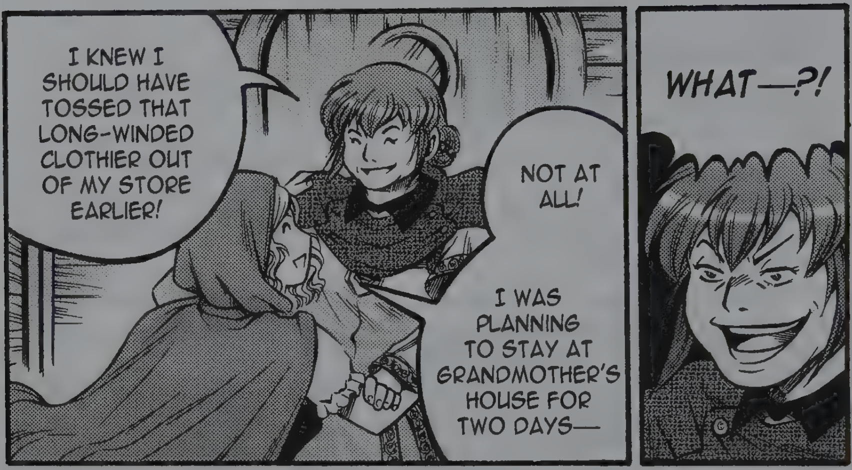
The hamper appeared new at the time, so Celsia had taken that story with a grain of salt. Until one day, when a heavy stack of cooking pots and pans in her stepmother's store toppled over—right onto the hamper.

Horrified, she had dug frantically at the pile. She was expecting a mess of splintered reeds, but the basket had miraculously emerged from the wreckage unscathed, and without even a single scratch. Her stepmother had gawked, as if a phoenix had just risen from a pile of ashes. Celsia was no less amazed.

Since then, it had remained in pristine condition, surviving a wagon, a dog and a falling person. To Celsia, that only elevated her 'family heirloom' to semi-mythical status. It became something akin to a protective talisman.

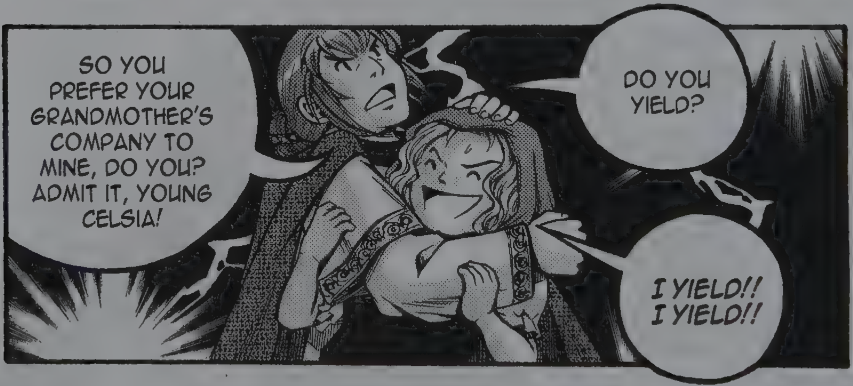
Some people have stuffed bears, while others have security blankets. I have my hamper, Celsia thought, packing the food in tightly.


SO, THE SPECIAL HAMPER AND ITS PET GIRL WILL BE OFF TO GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE, EH?
STEP-MOTHER!
YOU'VE COME BACK EARLY!
JUST IN TIME TO KISS THE LITTLE RED HOOD GOODBYE, IT SEEMS!
BREE WHITOAK
MERCHANT


I KNEW I SHOULD HAVE TOSSED THAT LONG-WINDED CLOTHIER OUT OF MY STORE EARLIER!
NOT AT ALL!
I WAS PLANNING TO STAY AT GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE FOR TWO DAYS—
WHAT—?!

'A hard-working woman comes home after a long week of absence, and her daughter *immediately* leaves for a two-day trip. What will the neighbours think?!'

Bree rose to her full height in mock outrage. She was a successful merchant in her late-forties; a short, stocky woman with a booming laugh and a bustling demeanour. Tough and energetic, she was often seen haggling with merchants, or carrying baskets full of merchandise in her store. She was also capable of a mean headlock, as she was sometimes eager to demonstrate to Celsia.

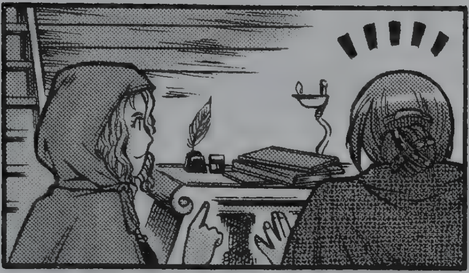

SO YOU PREFER YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S COMPANY TO MINE, DO YOU? ADMIT IT, YOUNG CELSIA!
DO YOU YIELD?
I YIELD!! I YIELD!!

Celsia squirmed out of Bree's arms and laughed.

'I was *about* to tell you I've decided to cut short my visit to Grandmother's house. I shall return tonight, we can have dinner together, and you can tell me all about that long-winded cloth merchant.'

Bree smiled in approval, and Celsia knew the playful wrestling match was over. If only she had the same stout physique as her stepmother—she would never yield that easily. However, that would only encourage Bree to sell tickets to their wrestling bouts and turn it into the village attraction.

'I'll just stay for the afternoon, and read a few books.'



'That's good. Books are good. While we're on the subject of books—'

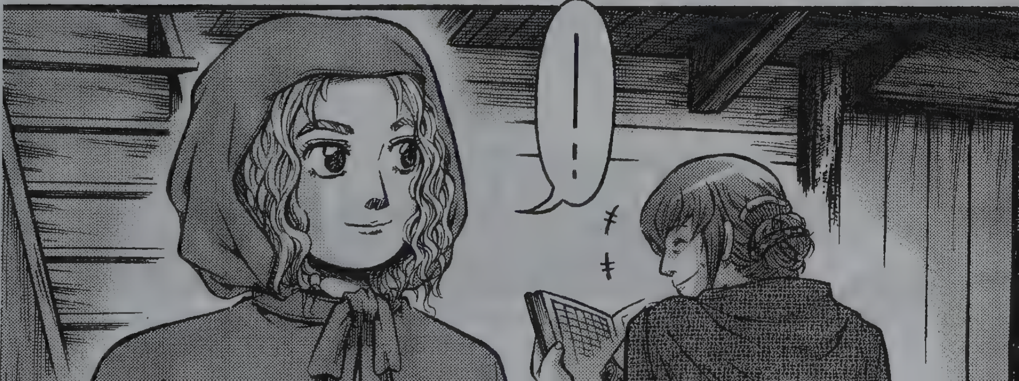
'—the ledgers for *The Trading Oak* are on that table. The calculations have been checked, double-checked, and corrected where necessary.'

'Oh, wonderful! Celsia, you're such a good girl!'

Celsia smiled and gently shook her head, as her stepmother bounded over to the table. Bree was predictable that way. With her, it was always 'Family First! Money Second!' She ran *The Trading Oak* in nearby Loguetown, a trading post she had established years before Celsia's birth. Such was her success, she now owned a stake in another similar business in Reversby. Inevitably, this meant she often travelled away from home.

When Celsia was younger, she would accompany Bree on those trips, giving her a chance to meet a variety of merchants from distant lands. It was then that she met a young, handsome merchant with dark eyes and dusky skin, who slipped his hand around hers and kissed her fingertips. He was from across the Eastern Seas, and as he ran two ring-clad fingers down a pale streak in her hair, he looked into her eyes and pronounced—*kissed by the sun, the moon, and the stars.*

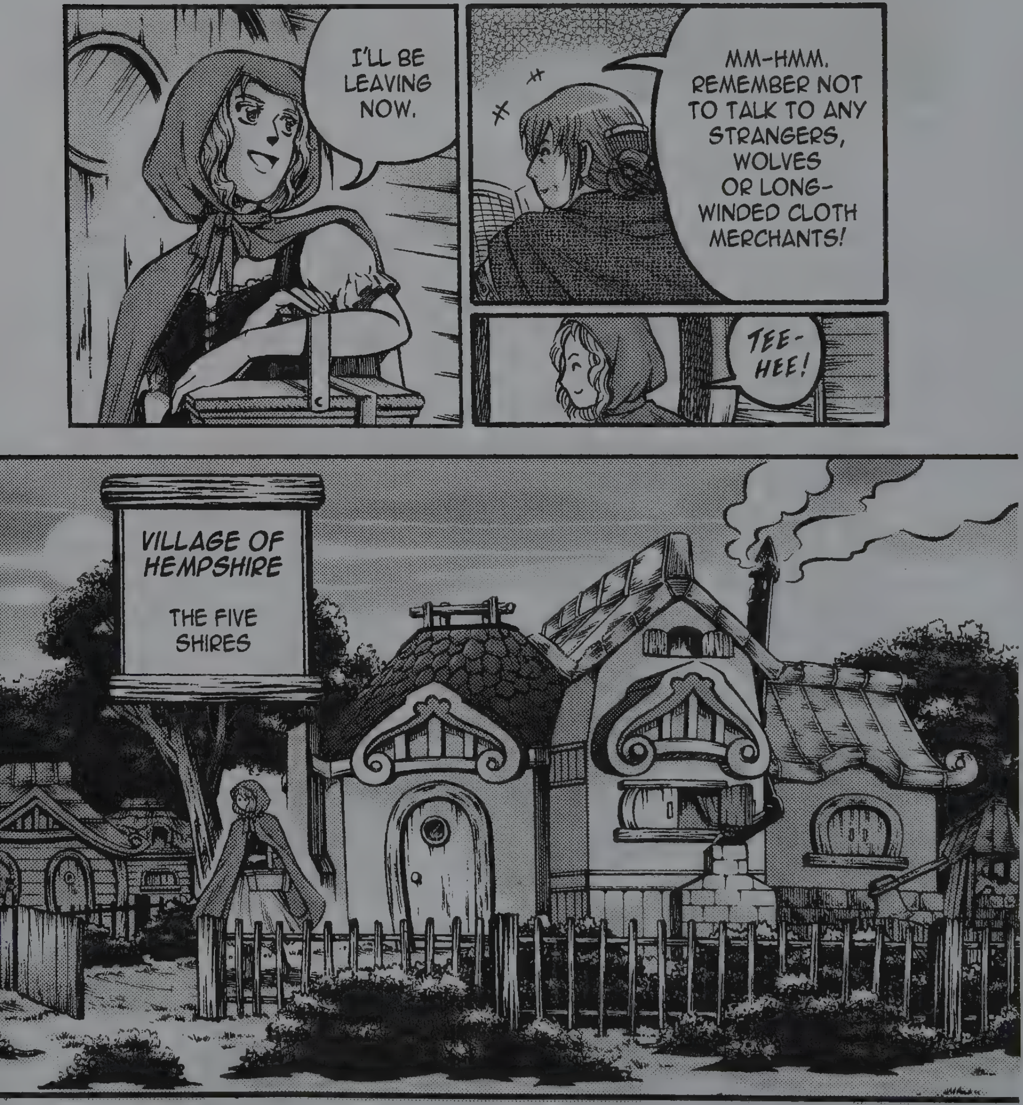
At the time, she had thanked him politely. She then excused herself to swan around like Balora the Beautiful for the rest of the day.



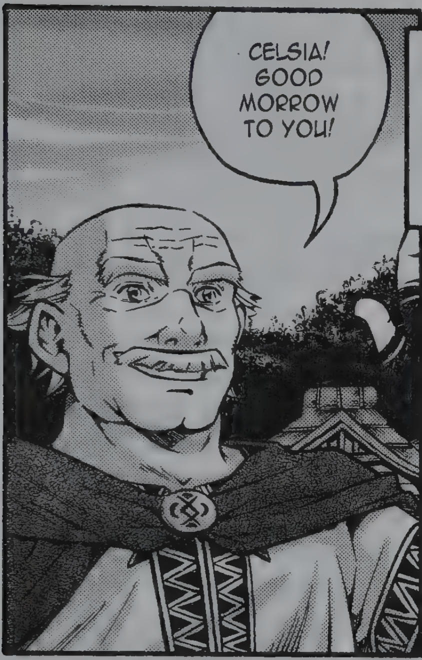
Celsia could still recall the day she chose her grandmother's path over her stepmother's vocation. Bree's mouth had tightened at the news, while Celsia had mumbled, staring at the floor. She had felt her stepmother's gaze turn cold.

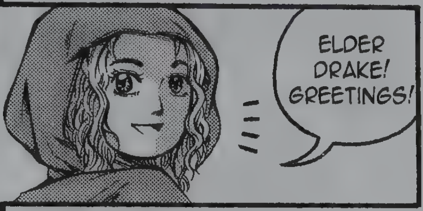
Bree had stalked off in silence, speaking to Celsia only after a few tense days had passed. It might have been an awkward conversation about the market price of dyed Westeren wool, but much to Celsia's relief, it showed that Bree had finally accepted this new reality. After all: *Family first! Money second!*

Leaving her stepmother to flip through the ledgers, Celsia picked up her hamper and headed for the door.


I'LL BE LEAVING NOW.
MM-HMM. REMEMBER NOT TO TALK TO ANY STRANGERS, WOLVES OR LONG-WINDED CLOTH MERCHANTS!
TEE-HEE!
VILLAGE OF HEMPSHIRE
THE FIVE SHIRES

The sun was already high in the sky, as Celsia set off down the dirt path. She briefly waved to Hetty, who was feeding her chickens, and also to Tom, who returned the salutations. She passed Big Jeb as he hefted his axe, ready to split the log standing in front of him in half. As she rounded the goat shed owned by the Paxtons, a voice calling her from behind bade her stop and turn.


CELSIA! GOOD MORROW TO YOU!


ELDER DRAKE! GREETINGS!

'I see you're off to Lefrenia's house. Please give her my regards, and *do* ask her when she will chance down to Hempshire, even if it's just for a bit of tea and cake with the village elder.'

Celsia smiled and bobbed her head. 'I thank you for your kindness. I will pass on your message.'

'I thought I'd also let you know that Quillon is hunting in the woods today. In fact, you may well see him on your way to Lefrenia's.'

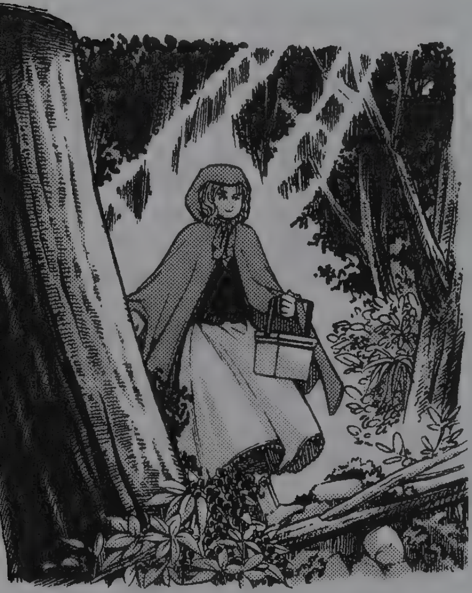
The elder winked as he said that, and Celsia laughed.

'If only I was capable of spotting Quillon when he is hunting in the woods. I would possess vision worthy of the gods, and be able to see straight through trees.'

Celsia bid goodbye to Elder Drake, and headed towards the forest. Quillon was the younger grandson of the elder and by far the best huntsman in the village, if not the Five Shires (*In the world!* His grandfather would say).

She had never once seen him miss a target with his bow, and he could move silently through the woods, undetected by the deer and pheasants he hunted. More than once, he had told her that whenever she walked through the forest, he could hear her crashing loudly through the undergrowth from a dozen yards away, oblivious to his presence.

The day I spot Quillon in the woods before he spots me will be the day I walk on water and turn bread into cake, Celsia mused, as she entered the cool, familiar shade of the forest fringes.

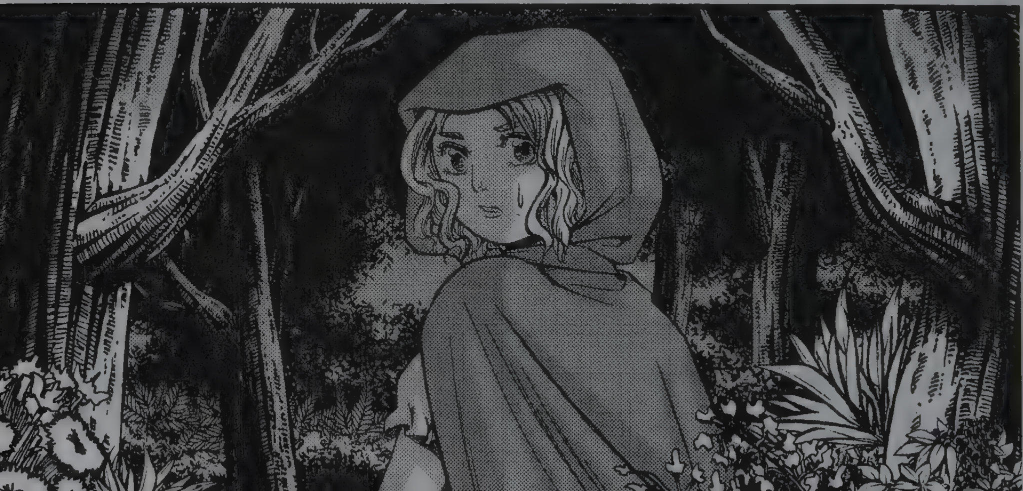


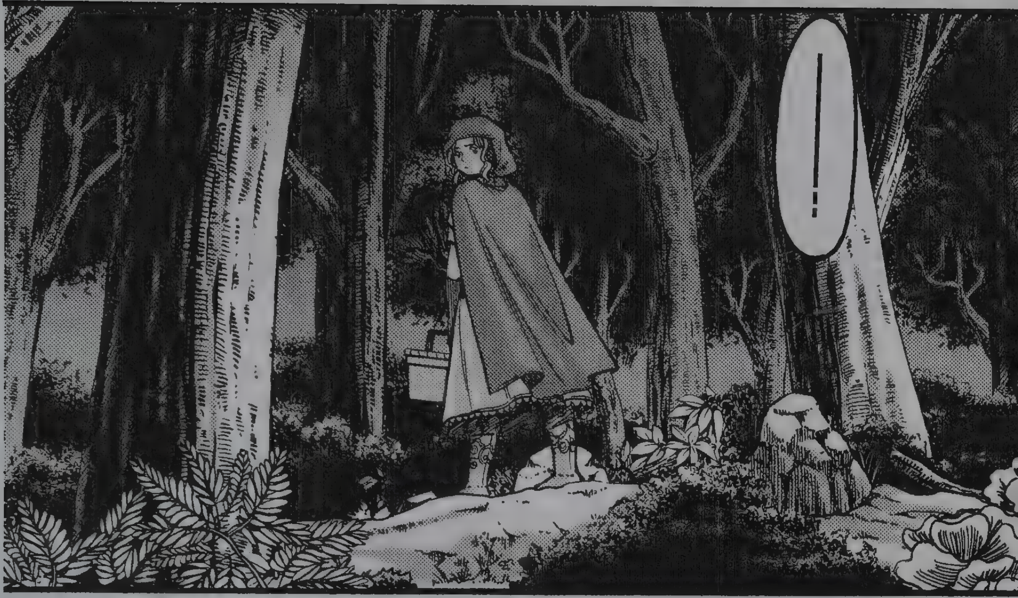
It was a well-worn path to her, and she slowed her pace, pausing to pick a cluster of blueberries from one of the bushes along the way. She kept her eye open for the more typical medicinal herbs her grandmother used, the ones they were constantly in need of. It was for treating the more common village ailments, such as colds, fevers, pains, cuts, burns and insect bites.

She snapped a branch of elderberries from a bush off the main path, and then paused to gather a dozen leaves of plantain. Lavender was already grown in her village in abundance, but wild-grown nettle, sage, and thyme was always more potent. Sadly, she only managed to pluck a single bush of stinging nettle this time. She also spotted no edible mushrooms in the usual nooks and crannies where they were found.

After ten minutes of strolling, Celsia began to wonder about the stillness in the air. The woods were quieter on some days than others, but today, even the routine chirping and fluttering of the birds wasabsent. It was as if all the woodland animals had fled.

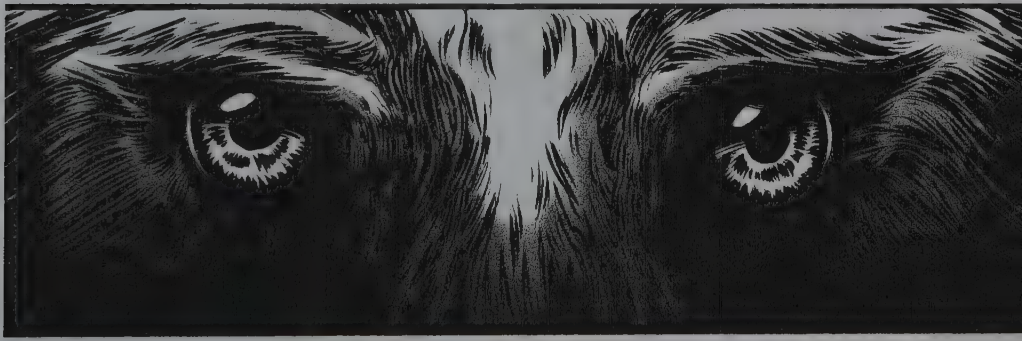
Strange.





Celsia shivered and quickened her pace. Usually a leisurely twenty-minute stroll would take her to grandmother's house, and she was already two-thirds of the way. As she nimbly stepped over the fallen branches and stones that littered the path, she drew the hood of her red cloak closer to her face. Unbidden, Quillon's voice echoed through her head.

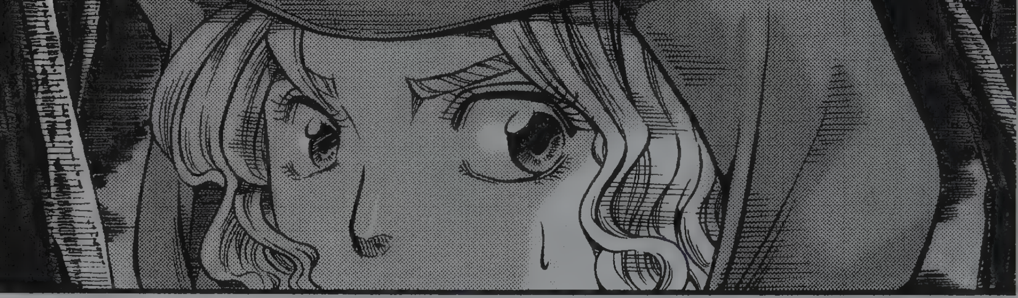
Red is not a colour for the woods. Whenever I see you walking through the forest, I see a streak of blood, splattered on the green.



And then, she felt *it*.

A cold finger slid down her spine, and the hairs on the back of her neck rose. Suddenly, she felt the urge to break into a run, fleeing from whatever it was that was scaring her so much—

No! Her inner voice screamed, piercing through the fog clouding her mind. *Never run! Whatever it is, you will never outrun it! Walk as before, and show no fear! Show fear, and it will all be over!*



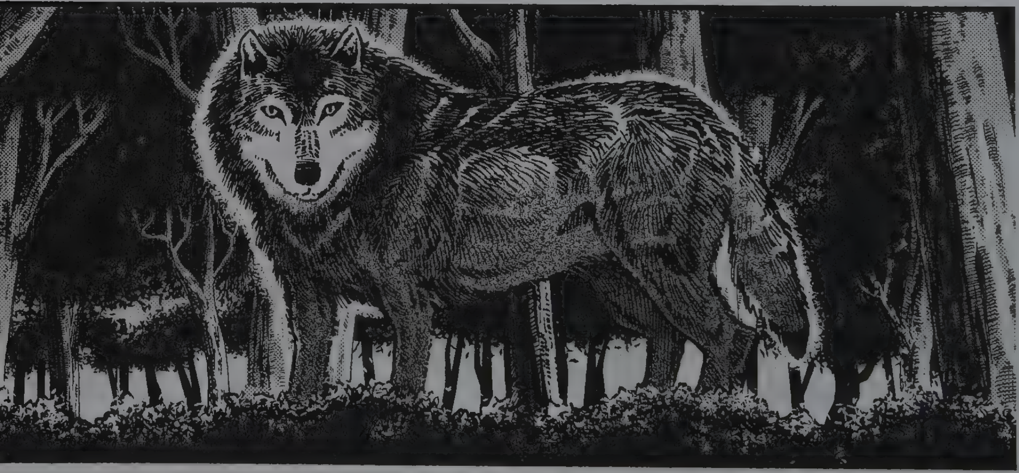
Celsia continued her brisk pace, her eyes darting left and right. She tried to spot any fast-moving shadows, but nothing so much as flitted on the outskirts of her vision. She could now see her grandmother's house ahead, an elevated wooden cottage built on an old oak. It was in a clearing bright with sunshine—her sanctuary in the woods.

Just a bit more, her inner voice urged.

The worst she had ever encountered in these woods had been a few lone wolves, more frightened of humans than the other way around. 'Bears' and 'lions' were supposed to be gigantic creatures that stood on their hind legs and ate men whole, but she had only seen pictures of them in books. What could possibly be there? Perhaps she was scaring herself over nothing, like she sometimes did as a child.

Calm down, Celsia. This is embarrassing, for someone your age.

Suddenly, a large, dark shape drifted into the corner of her eye. She whipped around, facing it head on.

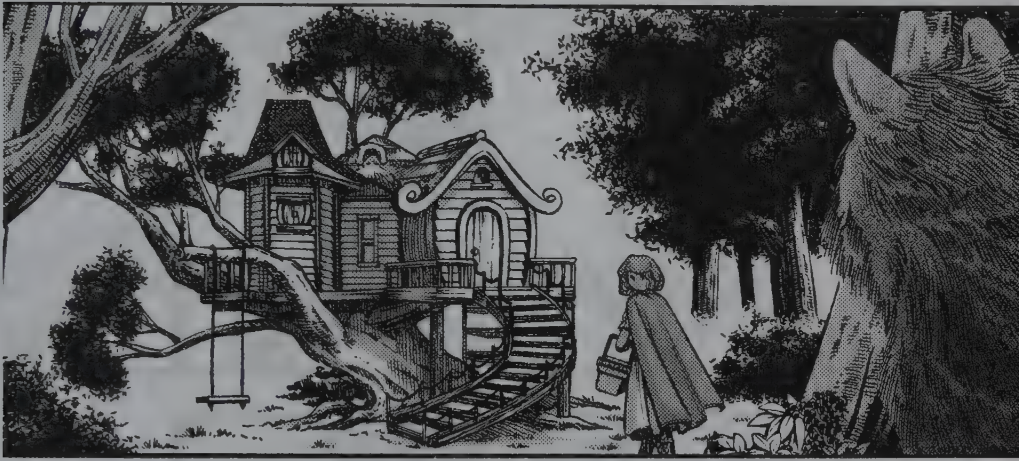


It was *huge*. A *freak*.

The enormous wolf looked at her. Its eyes gleamed in the forest shade, like liquid pools of amber. Celsia stared right back, and that emboldened her. Though the wolf was her height or taller, for some reason, she didn't feel as afraid as she ought to be.

The wolf stood motionless. Celsia's fingers, meanwhile, inched towards the small dagger she always kept in a pocket of her cloak. Quillon had encountered wolves before, so she tried to recall his advice, looking for signs of aggression.

The wolf's body was relaxed, and its tail was lowered. Its ears were erect, and it did not bare its teeth. Celsia watched the wolf for a few more seconds, then slowly started walking towards her grandmother's house. She never took her eyes off the shaggy bulk.

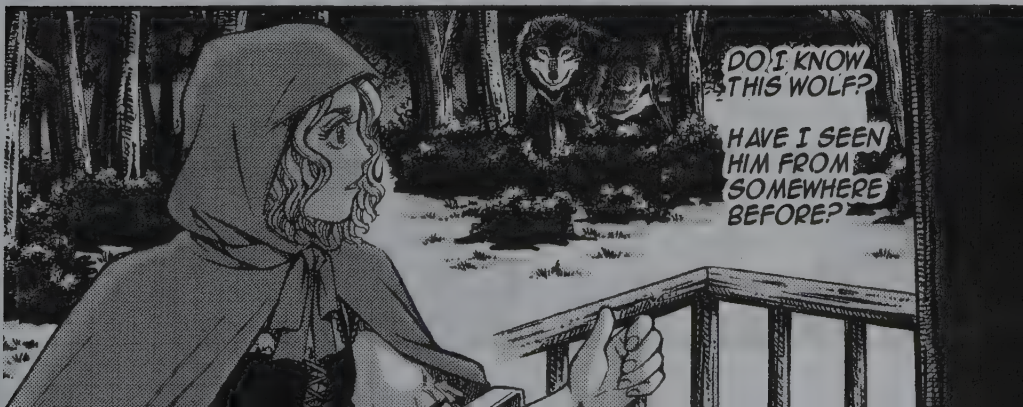


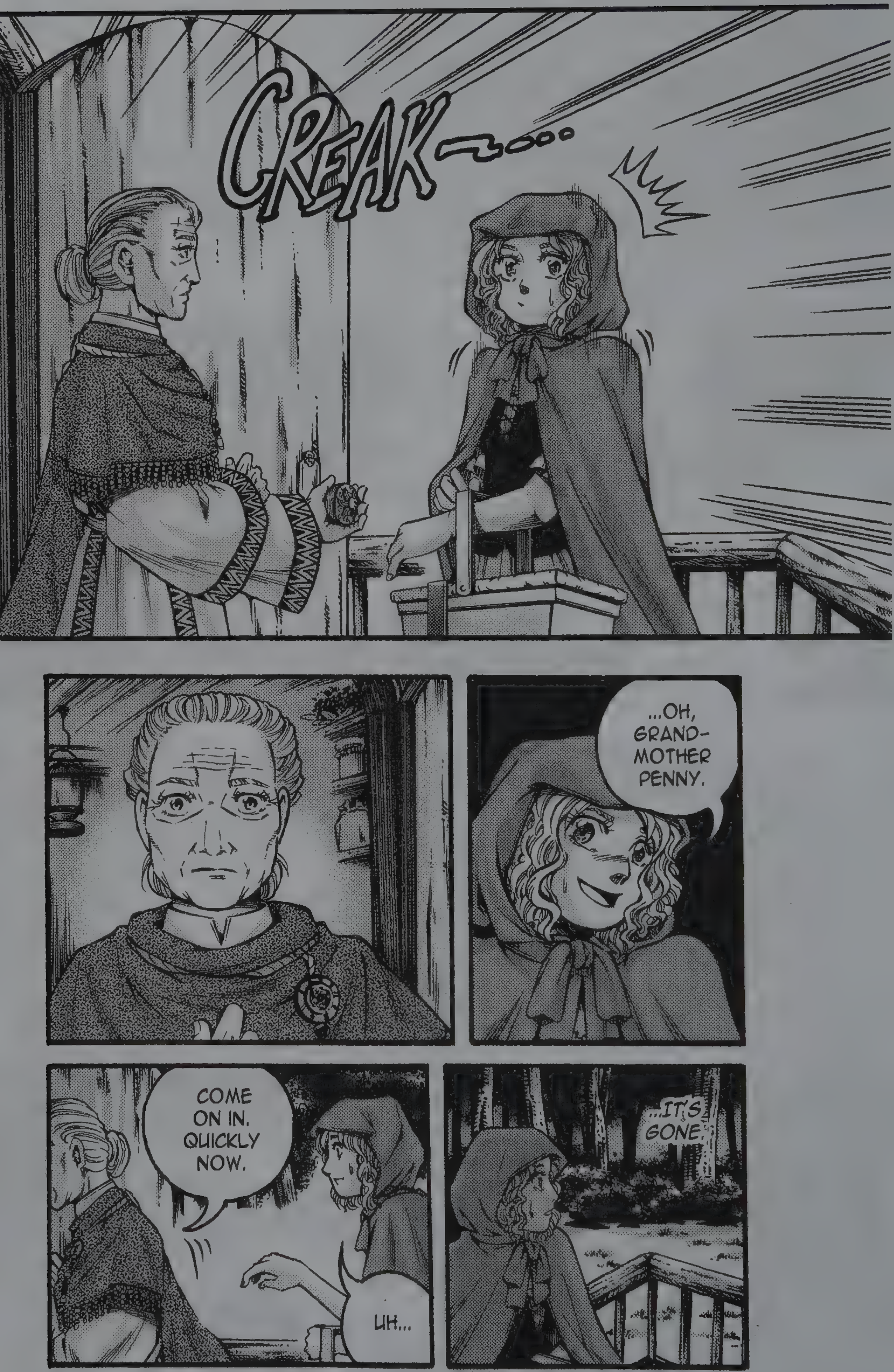
The creature made no effort to follow her. It continued to stand motionless, all but for its massive head, which turned slowly to follow her. She now had one foot on the stairs to her grandmother's door. Her feet soon found the second step, and then the third.

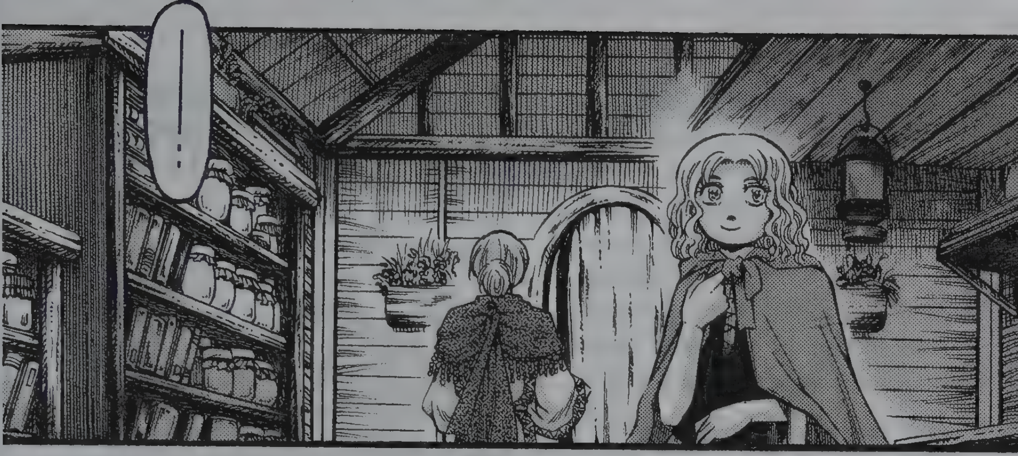
Celsia kept her eyes fixed on the wolf as she ascended, until she realised she was looking into its eyes. Oddly enough, it looked... *sorrowful*?

Almost human, she thought in wonder.

As she reached the door, a wave of familiarity washed over her, and she was struck with a sudden realisation.


DO I KNOW THIS WOLF?
HAVE I SEEN HIM FROM SOMEWHERE BEFORE?


CREAK-...
...OH, GRANDMOTHER PENNY.
COME ON IN. QUICKLY NOW.
UH...
...IT'S GONE.



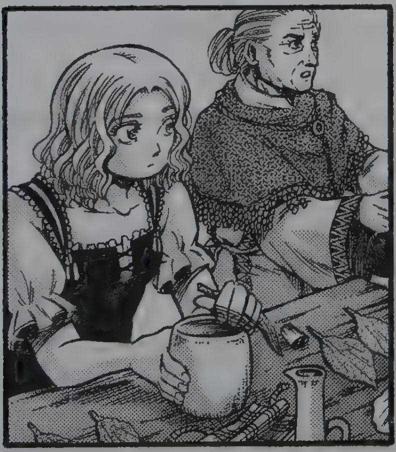
Celsia entered her grandmother's house, breathing in the familiar fragrances of the Healer's Hut. Putting down her hamper, she drew from it the herbs she had collected and placed them onto the workbench. Grandmother Penny turned and noticed the herbs, just as Celsia started to speak.

'Grandmother, just outside I saw—'

'Yes, yes, dear. I see you've collected some herbs for me, and I appreciate it. Now, these plantain leaves.'

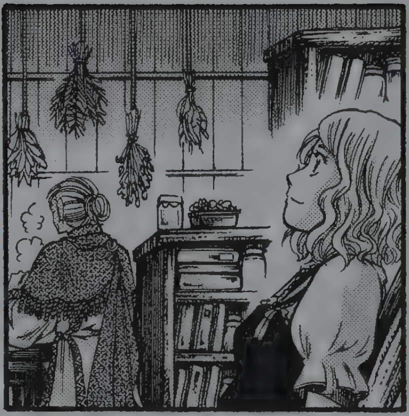
She picked one up, rubbing the leaf between her thumb and forefinger. 'These arrive at a most opportune time. A reminder I need to make more plantain salve. Help me prepare these, dear.'

Her grandmother spoke quickly, her manner strange and jittery. Affected, even. Celsia tried to look into her eyes to see if her pupils were dilated, but she had already turned away. After putting the kettle on the fire, she started chattering about how the Trents from Cottenshire had a bedbug infestation. She had given them her salve, and instructed them to boil all their bed sheets in hot water.



Celsia laid the plantain leaves down to dry. She then put them into a small jar with olive oil, sealing the top with cloth and string. She unpacked the rest of her hamper, just as her grandmother started to heat a small chunk of bees wax.

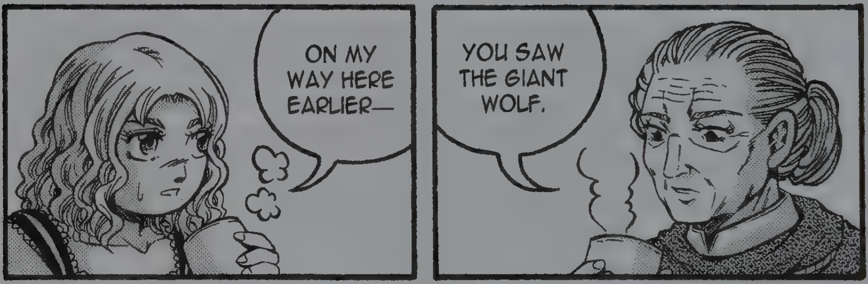
What's wrong with her? Celsia wondered. *Could she have seen the wolf earlier?* However, if she had, she would have engulfed Celsia in a hug of relief the moment she opened the door.



Making salve was a simple, routine task, so the work was quick. Celsia sat and waited for the bees wax to set, admiring the little bunches of thyme, sage, mint, and lavender hanging from the walls. Under them sat thick volumes of leather-bound books and little clay jars, stacked side-by-side on the shelves. They were filled with fennel seeds, dried rose hips, poppy oil, aloe sap, tansy, milk thistle seeds, and a dozen other herbs and plants that were part of her grandmother's stores.

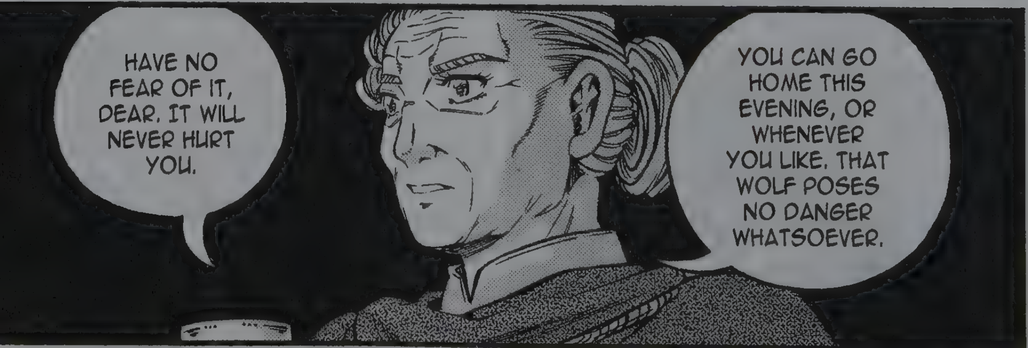
'Some elderberry tea, dear?'

Celsia turned to see her grandmother smiling stiffly, with teacups in hand. She nodded in thanks. Once the tea was served, she opened her mouth to speak.


ON MY WAY HERE EARLIER—
YOU SAW THE GIANT WOLF.

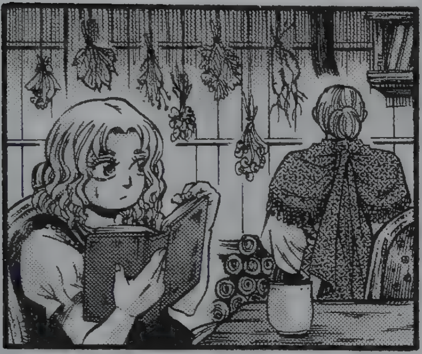
'—The wolf with the sad, golden eyes.'

Celsia almost choked in disbelief. She looked at her grandmother's face, as the old woman met her eyes calmly.


HAVE NO FEAR OF IT, DEAR. IT WILL NEVER HURT YOU.
YOU CAN GO HOME THIS EVENING, OR WHENEVER YOU LIKE. THAT WOLF POSES NO DANGER WHATSOEVER.

It was clear from her grandmother's clipped tone of voice that the topic was off-limits, and wild horses could not drag it from her. Celsia stared in bafflement, and then nodded mutely. It was going to be one of those afternoons.

So Celsia politely told her grandmother of Bree's unexpected return (*'Yes, yes,' she said*), and informed her of Elder Drake's invitation (*'Someday I shall'*). She then asked to remain and read until the evening, after which Grandmother rose to prepare dinner, and Celsia started to read *The Four Humours of the Body*, followed by *Histories of the Northern Kingdoms.*



Celsia stole a look at her grandmother, puttering about in the kitchen. Normally Grandmother was quiet where Bree was boisterous, but they were both upbeat and positive in their own way.

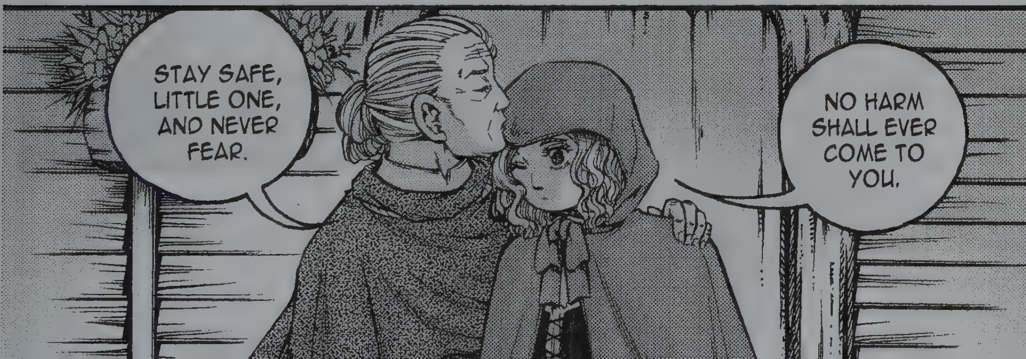
Whenever Grandmother visited her and Bree in Hempshire, they would sit the old woman in front of their fireplace and prance about, re-enacting all the humorous encounters they'd had with the colourful foreign merchants who visited Bree's businesses. Grandmother would nod sagely and sip her tea, a smile tugging at her lips. That would be *much* preferable to the subdued atmosphere in the cottage today.

Giant wolves and secretive grandmothers. Perhaps it's best I leave soon, Celsia thought.

She would come back in a day or two, when this strange cloud had passed and her grandmother became more sociable. Why, she might even feel generous enough to tell her the story of the wolf. For now, she could only deduce that it was a visiting friend of Grandmother's.

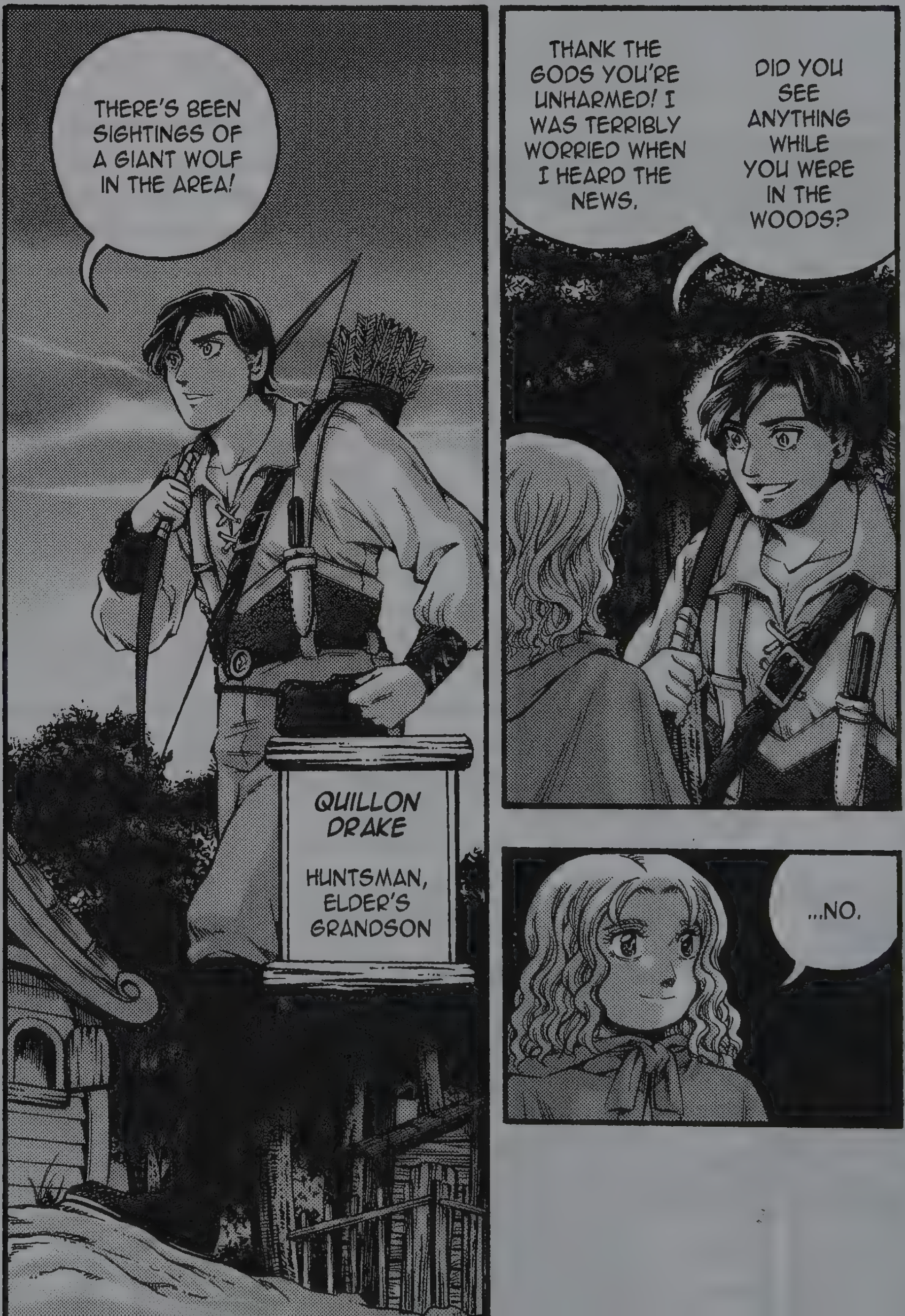
'I must be leaving now, Grandmother. I shall return in a few days with more food.'

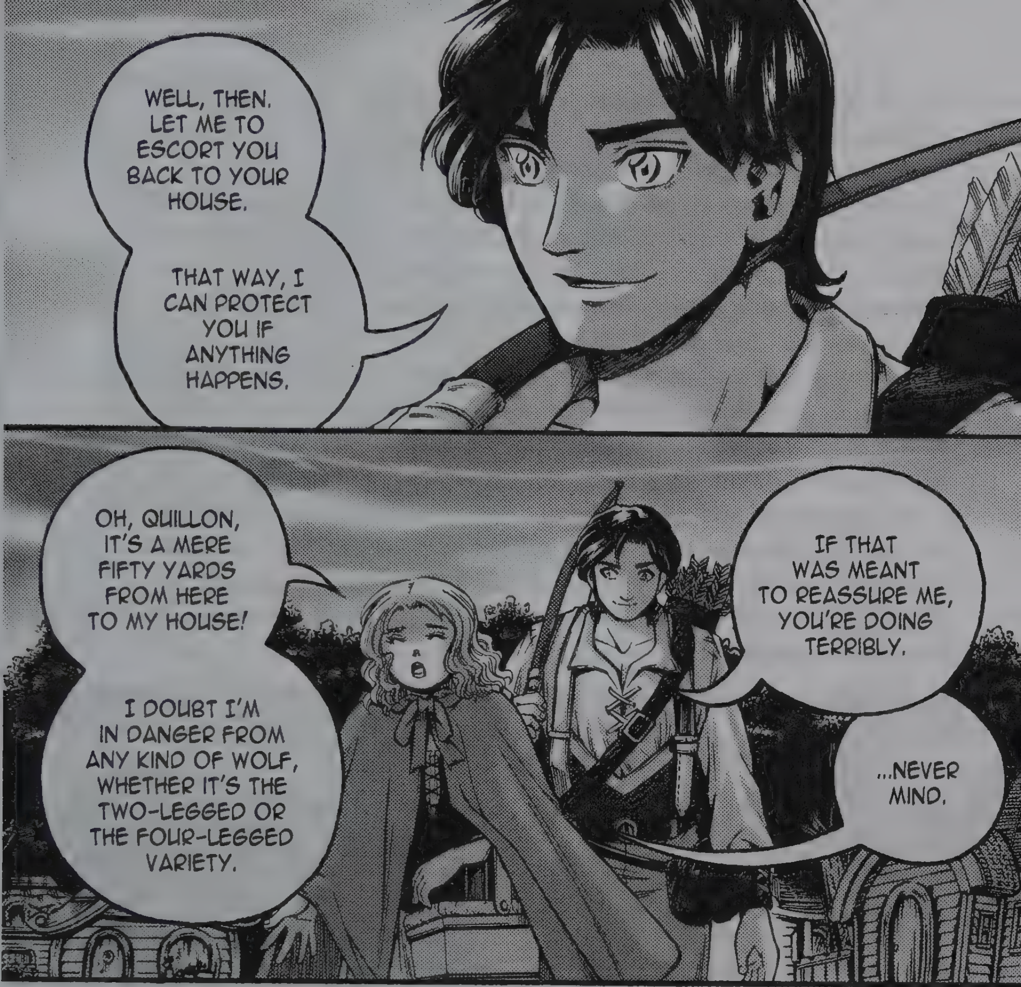
Grandmother nodded, then turned to see her out the door.


STAY SAFE, LITTLE ONE, AND NEVER FEAR.
NO HARM SHALL EVER COME TO YOU.

It was a quiet and uneventful walk back to the village, as dusk settled and the stars began to shine. Celsia kept a close eye on the shadows, but all the normal sounds of the woods seemed to have returned. A chorus of crickets were chirping loudy by the time she set foot back in Hempshire.

'Celsia! Are you all right?'


THERE'S BEEN SIGHTINGS OF A GIANT WOLF IN THE AREA!
QUILLON DRAKE
HUNTSMAN, ELDER'S GRANDSON
THANK THE GODS YOU'RE UNHARMED! I WAS TERRIBLY WORRIED WHEN I HEARD THE NEWS.
DID YOU SEE ANYTHING WHILE YOU WERE IN THE WOODS?
...NO.


WELL, THEN. LET ME TO ESCORT YOU BACK TO YOUR HOUSE.
THAT WAY, I CAN PROTECT YOU IF ANYTHING HAPPENS.
OH, QUILLON, IT'S A MERE FIFTY YARDS FROM HERE TO MY HOUSE!
I DOUBT I'M IN DANGER FROM ANY KIND OF WOLF, WHETHER IT'S THE TWO-LEGGED OR THE FOUR-LEGGED VARIETY.
IF THAT WAS MEANT TO REASSURE ME, YOU'RE DOING TERRIBLY.
...NEVER MIND.

Quillon is kind and sweet, but he can be ridiculously over-protective at times, Celsia thought, as they walked past Elder Drake's house. If the elder was at his window, he would be saluting them and giving Celsia another one of his winks. Instead, she noticed a newly-killed pheasant hanging from between two poles, expertly shot by an arrow still lodged in its body.

She turned to look at Quillon. 'Only one pheasant today?'

'Only one needed. My family does not lack for food, and any more will just go to waste. We only take what we need from the woods.'

'A good rule to live by.' Celsia nodded, smiling. 'I do the same when I'm plucking berries or gathering herbs. My grandmother always says: *some for us, some for the animals, and some for the bush itself.* Strip a plant of all its fruits and it will wither away, unable to renew itself.'

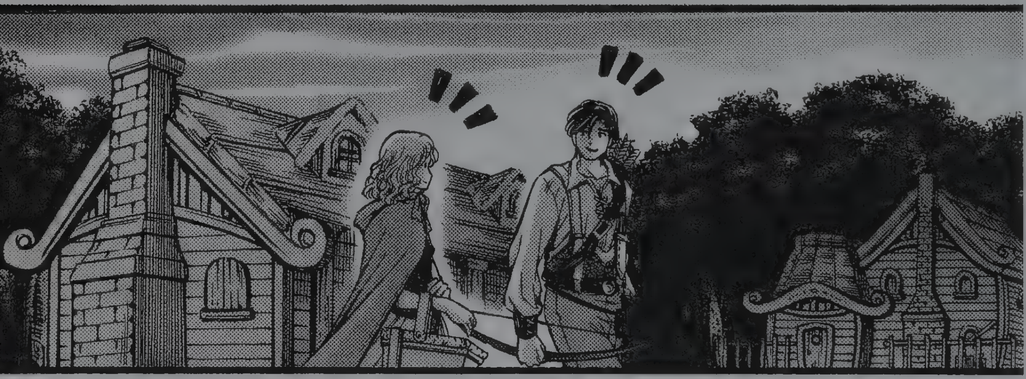
'So what did you do at Healer Penny's cottage today? Did you read any new books?'

'I did. Would you like to hear about it?'

Quillon perked up eagerly, and Celsia smiled. He could read and write, but between hunting and working for his grandfather, he had little time left to read for himself. For that reason, he would often look to Celsia to tell him stories from books she'd read, and also of her travels with Bree.

She was more than happy to oblige. She told him about the kingdoms to the north, and the University of Magic at Rhodes. She also told tales of the strange, goat-like creatures that lived on an isle to the north-east, and also of the faraway kingdoms in Askarith.

He had heard some of the stories before, but he never seemed to tire of them. Quillon had always wanted to travel, and this was the only way possible for him, at least for now. Still, talking about their future plans to see the world was one of Celsia's favourite pastimes when they were together.

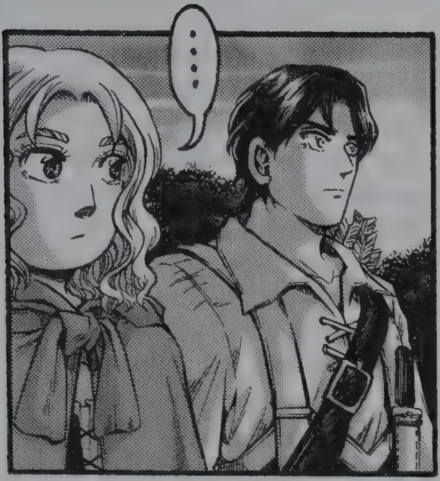


Sometimes she wondered what it would be like if she married Quillon. They were the only same-age children in their village, and had grown up together as neighbours. The Drakes were well-off, owning a sizeable number of the hemp farms around Hempshire. In fact, Elder Drake and Bree were business associates, in that *The Trading Oak* supplied part of the wares for the Drake's village store.

More like partners-in-crime, those two, Celsia thought.

Elder Drake would certainly be thrilled at the idea. The old man must have been exhausting his right eye lately, from the way he winked at Celsia every time Quillon's name was mentioned. And what did Quillon think of all this? He probably wouldn't mind. He enjoyed her company, and was above all else, a dutiful grandson.

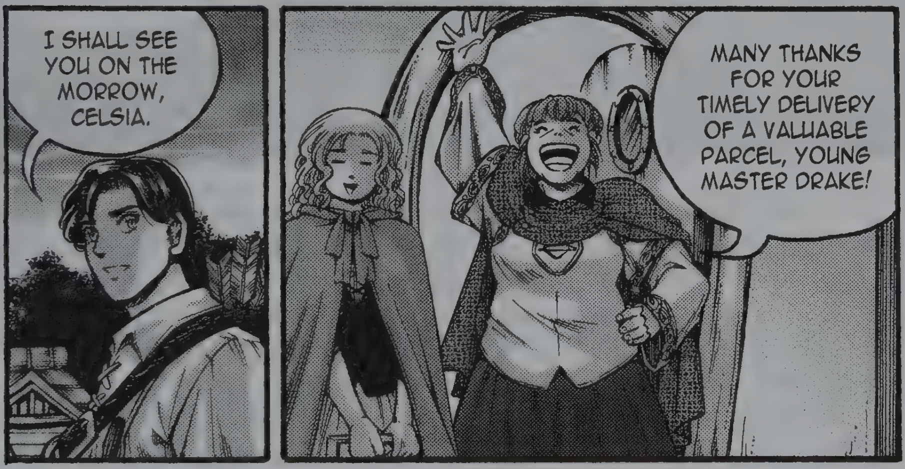
And her? How did she feel about it?



Celsia stole a glance at Quillon. His eyes were an unnaturally pale blue, with irises so white they seemed to glow in the dark. He was listening to her stories, but even as she spoke, his eyes were darting back and forth, looking for dangers in the shadows of the village. It was a hunter's instinct. He was still on guard for that giant wolf.

Perhaps that was more important, in a way. At least with him, she would always be safe.

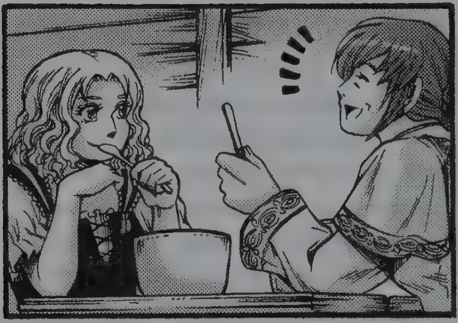
'Here we are.' Quillon said abruptly. They were standing directly in front of her house, and Quillon rapped sharply on the door. Bree flung the door open in her characteristic bustling manner, and greetings were exchanged. He turned to leave.



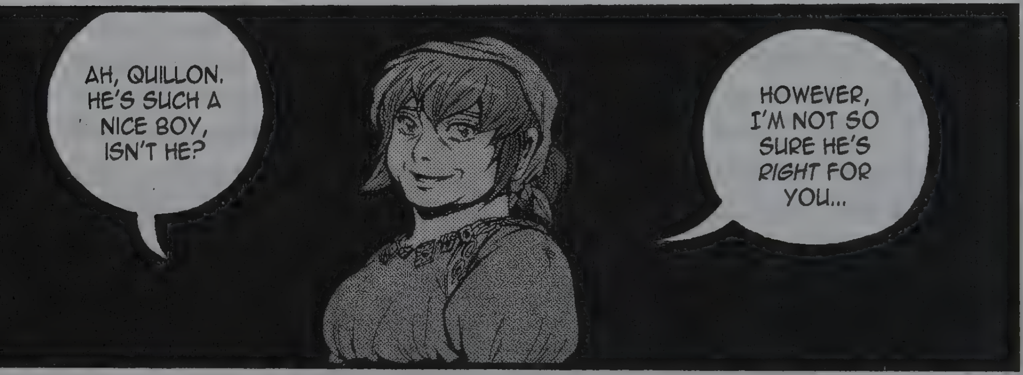
I SHALL SEE YOU ON THE MORROW, CELSIA.
MANY THANKS FOR YOUR TIMELY DELIVERY OF A VALUABLE PARCEL, YOUNG MASTER DRAKE!

The rest of the evening was spent with Bree, who happily chatted about importing candle holders from the Isle of Spring, and glass perfume bottles from Rivercliff. Then came the long-awaited Tale of the Talkative Clothier.

Celsia sat quietly and listened, nodding at the appropriate moments and spooning her vegetable soup into her mouth. Bree had spiced the soup with some basil, garlic and paprika, and had served several slices of mutton roasted with rosemary and mint. It was a plentiful meal that left her feeling quite full.



As Celsia listened to Bree, her thoughts wandered back to Quillon. To be sure, if he wanted to marry her, she would have no complaints. He was hard-working and well-liked, and she would be the envy of every girl in the Five Shires. Celsia had once relished that thought so much, she dropped hints in front of Bree, curious to see her reaction. At the time, Bree's reply was short, but unexpected.


AH, QUILLON. HE'S SUCH A NICE BOY, ISN'T HE?
HOWEVER, I'M NOT SO SURE HE'S RIGHT FOR YOU...

After dinner, Celsia washed the dishes and went to bed early. It had been a long, strange day, and thoughts of the giant wolf lingered only briefly in her mind. It was quickly replaced by a recurring dream, one that had remained more or less the same every time.

In the dream, she sat darning socks in front of a warm fireplace. Quillon would come home after a day of hunting to present her with a wolf's pelt, and they would sit down for the dinner she'd prepared. He would compliment her on her cooking, and she would smile back at him happily. Afterwards, she would don her red hood and proclaim that she was off to Grandmother's house, only to find that the lights had dimmed. Quillon now sat quiet and unmoving in his armchair, his face obscured by the dying light.

'*Don't go outside,*' he would say. '*It's dangerous, and I can't protect you from all the wolves.*'

Celsia would protest that she had to go. She's a healer, and people needed her. She turned to the door, only to find that the doorknob was gone, and when she looked around the room, all the windows had disappeared.

The room began to spin. The four walls of the house stretched high, looming menacingly over her. Then they started to descend, bearing down on her head while she cowered on the ground, clutching her basket to her chest.

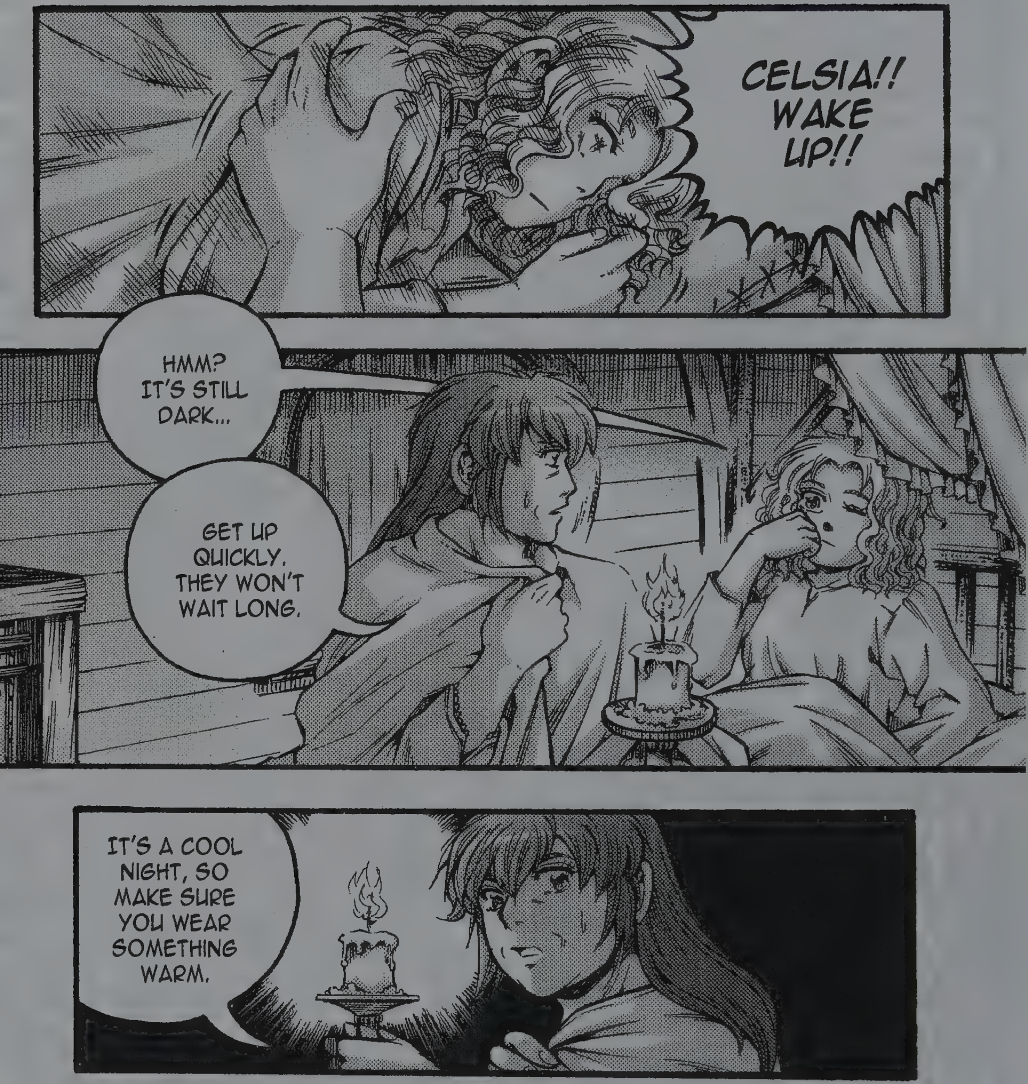
I'm not so sure he's right for you…

The lights in her dream would fade, and she would open her eyes, sometimes gasping for breath, other times silent and pensive. Most of the time she would move her lips in a quiet prayer, thanking the gods that it was only a dream.

That was all. Only a dream. A nightmare she could always wake up from.

2: THE TWO QUEENS

BY QUEENIE CHAN

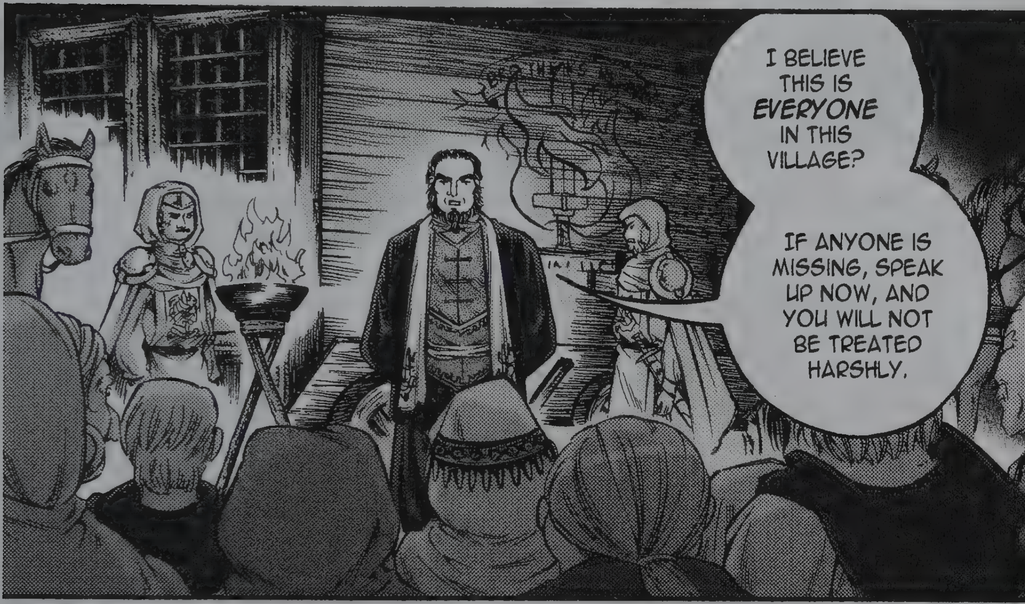

CELSIA!! WAKE UP!!
HMM? IT'S STILL DARK...
GET UP QUICKLY. THEY WON'T WAIT LONG.
IT'S A COOL NIGHT, SO MAKE SURE YOU WEAR SOMETHING WARM.

The tense look on Bree's face left little room for argument, so Celsia quickly and wordlessly obeyed. Shaking her head to clear the drowsiness, she pulled off her nightgown while her stepmother went to fetch a lantern. She could now hear the muffled sounds of horses clattering outside her window, followed by the loud thumps of armoured hands pounding on wooden doors.

Celsia slipped her red cloak around her shoulders, securing the hood with a simple bow at her neck. She gently touched her dagger in its little pocket, then joined Bree at the door. Together, they stepped out into the cool night air.

The full moon shone brightly in the starless sky, rendering the lantern in Bree's hand needless. It cast a pale, silvery sheen over the thatched roofs of the houses, broken here and there by the yellow glow of a torch or a lantern. A low, continuous drone of muttering voices could be heard, punctuated by the occasional shout. Villagers roamed about in confusion, as men on horses issued commands, herding them towards the village square.

Celsia and Bree were amongst the last to arrive at the simple patch of paved stones at the centre of their village. A tall man stood there, surrounded by men both on foot and mounted. A large, padlocked wagon drawn by four horses stood behind him.

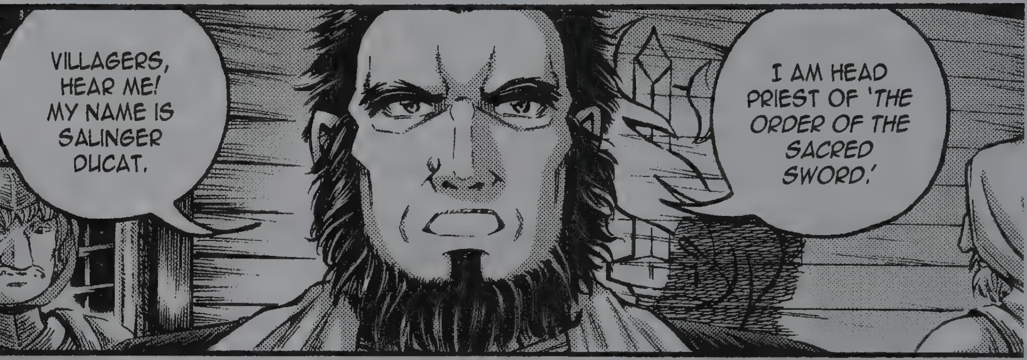

I BELIEVE THIS IS *EVERYONE* IN THIS VILLAGE?
IF ANYONE IS MISSING, SPEAK UP NOW, AND YOU WILL NOT BE TREATED HARSHLY.

BROTH
TOGETH

'The Priests of the Burning Heart?' Celsia thought. *Or was it 'Men of the Silver Sword?'*

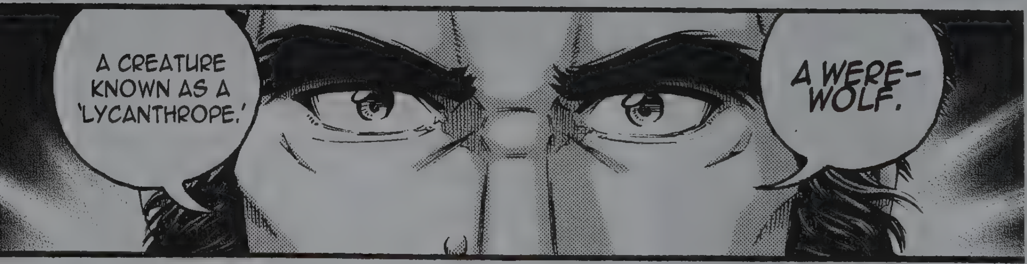
You could never tell with these groups. She hasn't seen one for years, but they passed through her village every now and then, making grave proclamations about wights or blood-sucking demons and ordering everyone to 'cleanse their souls.' She looked around and counted eight men, which was fewer than usual. However, some of them were mounted, and they looked better equipped than the other raggedy groups she had seen.

Celsia thought of something her grandmother once said. *Men with swords in the middle of the night are never known to bring good tidings, and the religious sort, shielded by their gods, act with even greater impunity.* These men may have come garbed as priests, but the clink of chain mail beneath their robes said otherwise.


VILLAGERS, HEAR ME! MY NAME IS SALINGER DUCAT.
I AM HEAD PRIEST OF 'THE ORDER OF THE SACRED SWORD.'

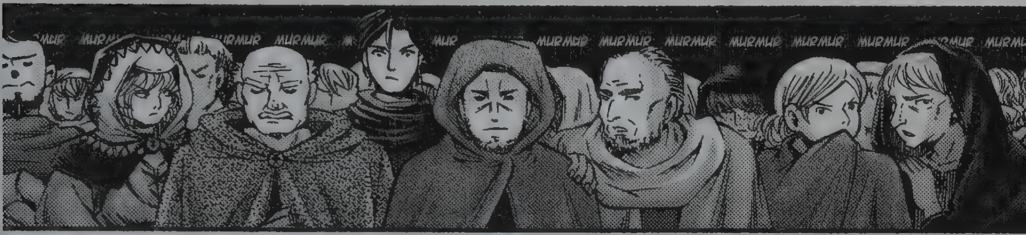
'We hail from the Free City of Freysia, and we are here to cleanse this land of a *foul* abomination we have chased all the way from the Sandy Shores. We have obtained explicit permission from your Council of Overseers, so I expect you all to honour my demands.'

The villagers murmured to each other, more so in surprise than anything else. The Council of Overseers was the local governing body in Silversby, but these men came *all the way from the Eastern Cities*? Celsia's eyes flicked over to Bree. Her stepmother had always hated people from the Eastern cities, but here her face betrayed no emotion. What on earth were they after?


A CREATURE KNOWN AS A 'LYCANTHROPE.'
A WERE-WOLF.

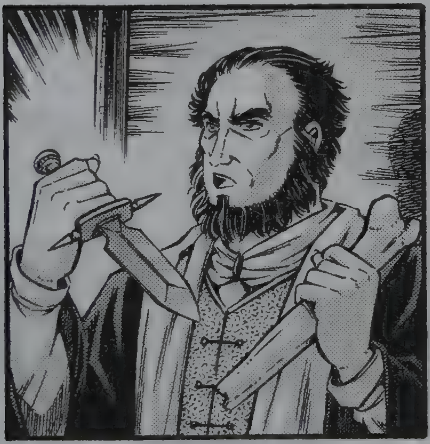
'A demon who to your eyes will appear as a giant wolf, but whose true form is a man cursed by the moon. By day he appears as a man, but by the night of the full moon, he transforms into a vicious monster with a ferocious taste for human flesh. His blood is poison and his saliva is diseased. One bite will either kill you, or pass his evil existence onto his victim, turning them into one of his own.'

Salinger paused for effect, then continued. 'I now ask for your honesty, and cooperation. If any of you have seen a giant wolf in this area, or have heard rumours of such a creature, come forth now and tell us what you know.'



No one came forward. Celsia stood silently in the crowd, almost *smelling* the mistrust coming from her fellow villagers. Strangers in these parts were normally treated with suspicion. It certainly didn't help that this was the first time Freysians had come so far west.

Salinger did not seem discouraged by the lack of response. He nodded to a man standing next to the wagon, who brought forth a long, bone-like object. Salinger took the bone and drew a dagger from his belt, brandishing it theatrically.



'These shape-shifters have abandoned us as their human brethren. In doing so, they make us their enemy, but also their prey.'

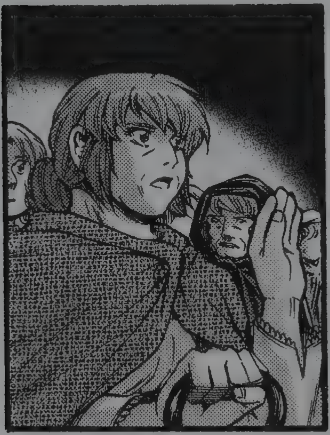
'He sounds as if he's reading from a script,' Celsia whispered to Bree, who hushed her with a sharp elbow to the ribs.

'They are evil, cunning, and always looking to spread their *filth,* so they can fill their ranks in their war against mankind. For that reason, by the authority of *The Order of the Sacred Sword,* each one of you must be tested for the taint of lycanthropy. Submit one drop of blood to this werewolf bone I'm holding, and all shall be revealed.'

The villagers muttered uneasily. *This* had never happened before. They found these strangers from the Eastern Cities and their bizarre blood rituals disagreeable, and there were a few boos and hisses.

Expecting the complaints, Salinger spoke again.

'May I remind you all that I have *explicit* permission from your Council, and can arrest you if I want. If anyone here refuses the test, or is found to be hiding a potential lycanthrope, both they and their families will be arrested.'



'I wish to speak.' All eyes turned to Bree, who stepped forward.

'We have a village healer who lives in the woods. She is an old woman, and a member of my family. I ask permission to send my daughter to fetch her here for the test.'

Salinger nodded. 'You may do so. We shall wait for her return.'

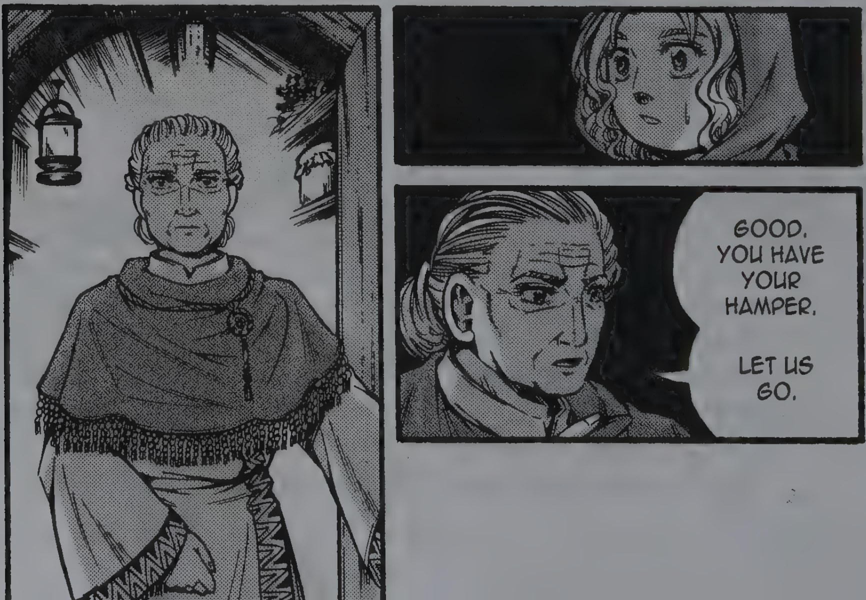
Bree turned to Celsia and gave her the lantern.

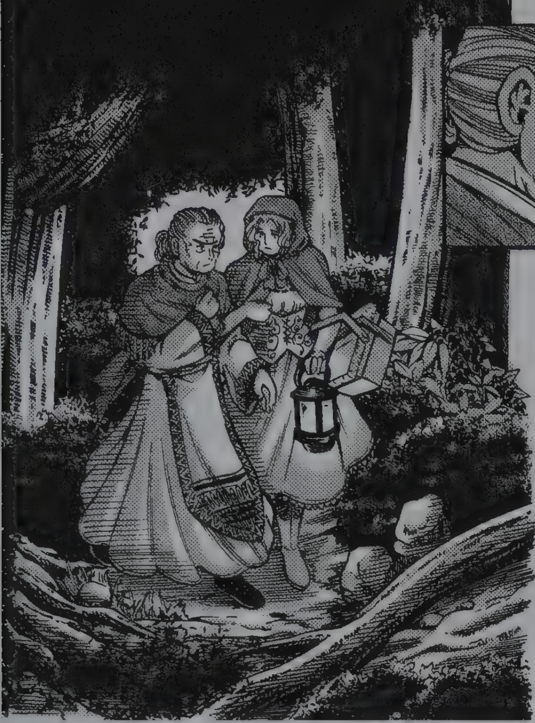
'Quickly, Celsia. It's a long walk from here to her house, and Grandmother cannot walk fast.'

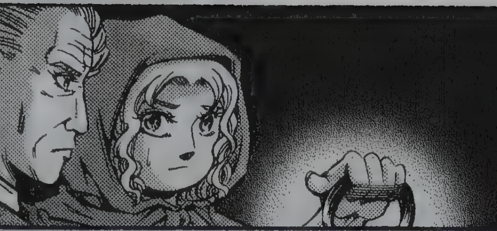
Celsia took the lantern and ran back to their house, grabbing her Special Hamper. Hugging it to her chest, she hurried to the forest path. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see all the villagers lining up, ready to take the test.

The woods were much darker than the village, but the path was so familiar to Celsia that she reached her grandmother's house in a little under fifteen minutes. Quietly knocking on the door, she anticipated having to walk in and rouse the old woman from sleep.

However, the door opened almost immediately.

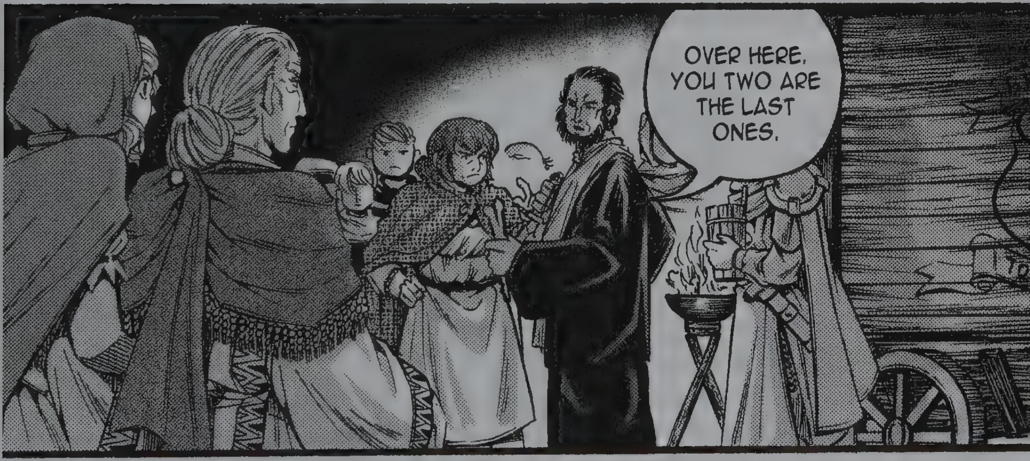

GOOD. YOU HAVE YOUR HAMPER.
LET US GO.





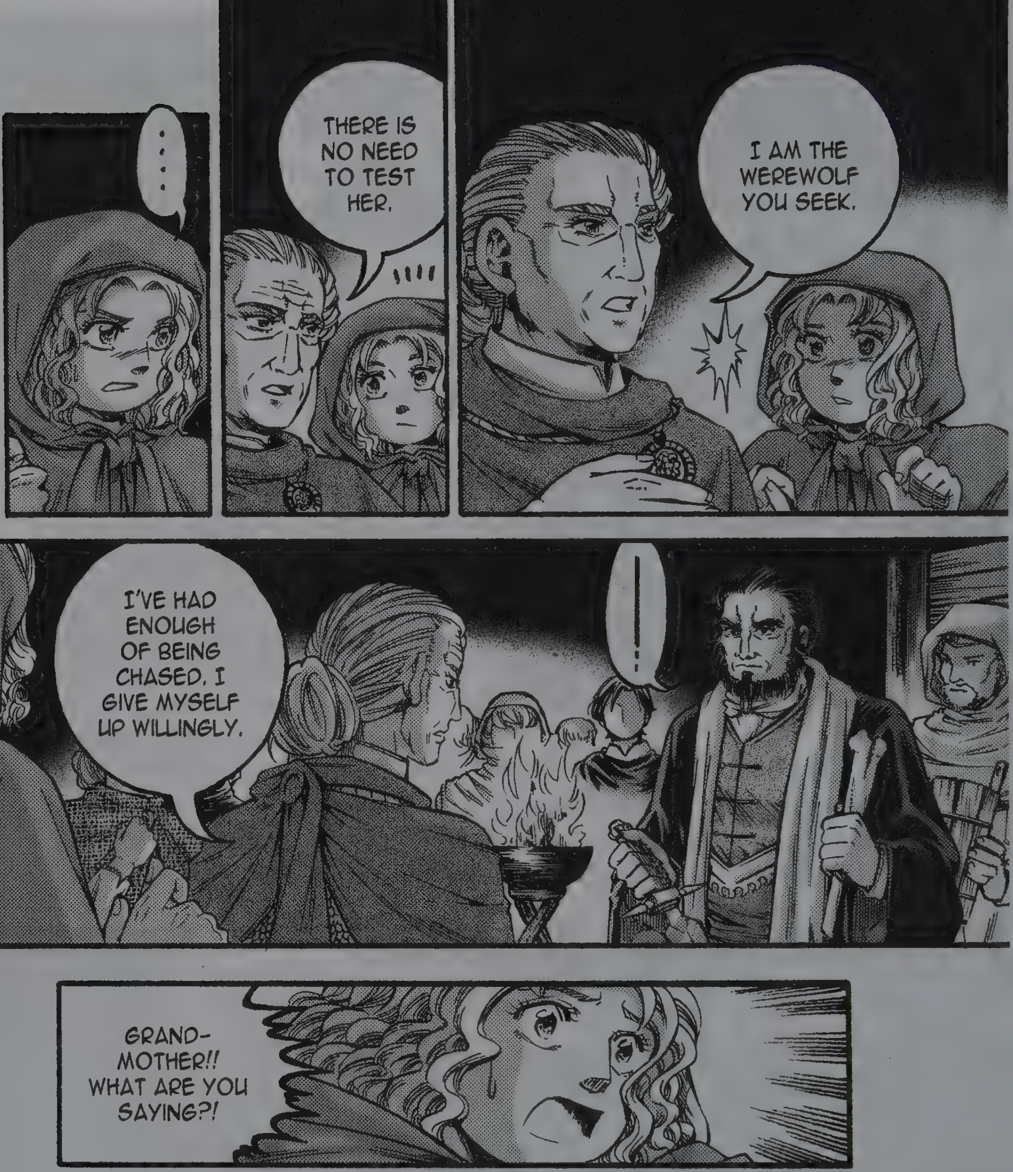
Celsia hurried through the woods with her grandmother on her arm. She was careful to illuminate the path in front of her, lest the old woman couldn't find her footing. Grandmother, on the other hand, walked firmly and with her mouth set in a thin line. Neither of them spoke.

It was clear her grandmother was fully aware of what was happening, and Celsia's heart pounded at the thought of *how*. But the man with the bone and dagger was waiting, and they could not afford to dawdle. Celsia pushed the anxiety out of her mind, and focused on the task at hand. They reached the village just in time to see Bree's finger cut with the dagger.


OVER HERE. YOU TWO ARE THE LAST ONES.

Bree seemed to pass the test without comment, and Salinger waved her away. He flicked his dagger and looked over, his eyes roaming over the two of them. They settled on Celsia.

'The young one first. Come here, girl.'

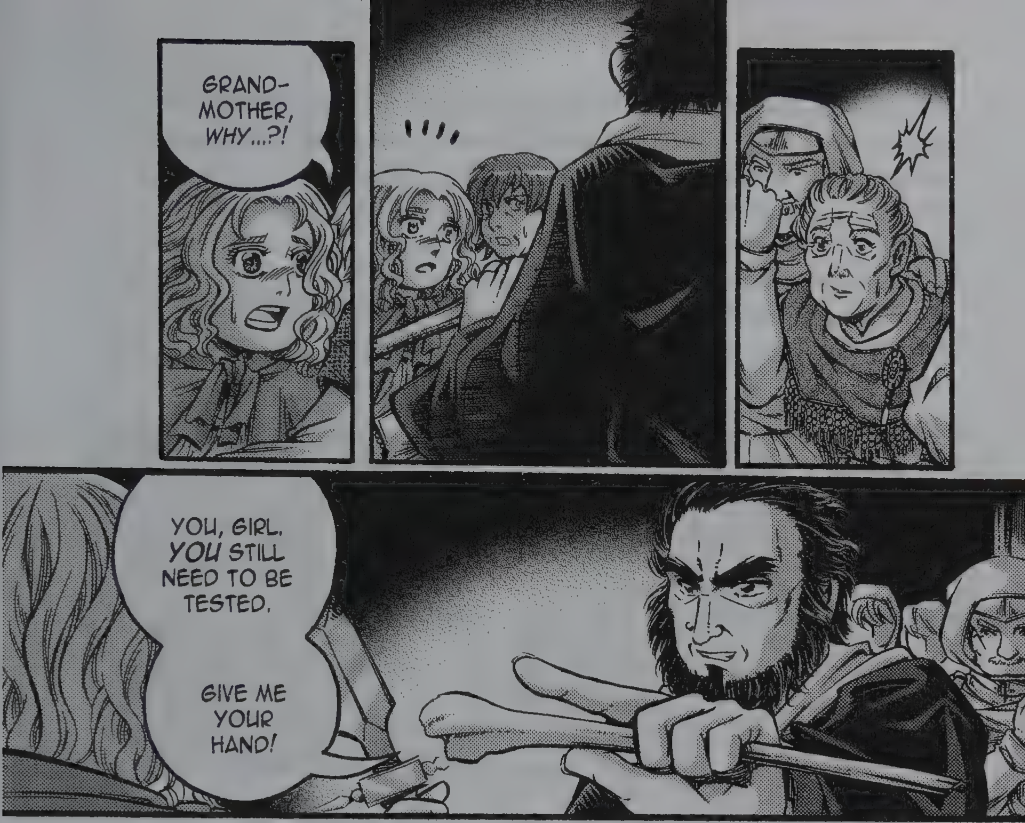

. . . . .
THERE IS NO NEED TO TEST HER.
I AM THE WEREWOLF YOU SEEK.
I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF BEING CHASED. I GIVE MYSELF UP WILLINGLY.
!
GRANDMOTHER!! WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?!

Salinger stared hard at the old woman's face, ignoring Celsia's protests. He gestured to his men, who stepped forward and seized Grandmother by her arms, dragging her to the wagon.

'No!!' Celsia shouted. Bree quickly moved in and grabbed Celsia, just in time to stop her from flinging herself at Salinger.

'I saw the giant wolf you seek in the forest today, close to my grandmother's house. My grandmother is ***not*** the werewolf! You have my word on that! She is not the one!'

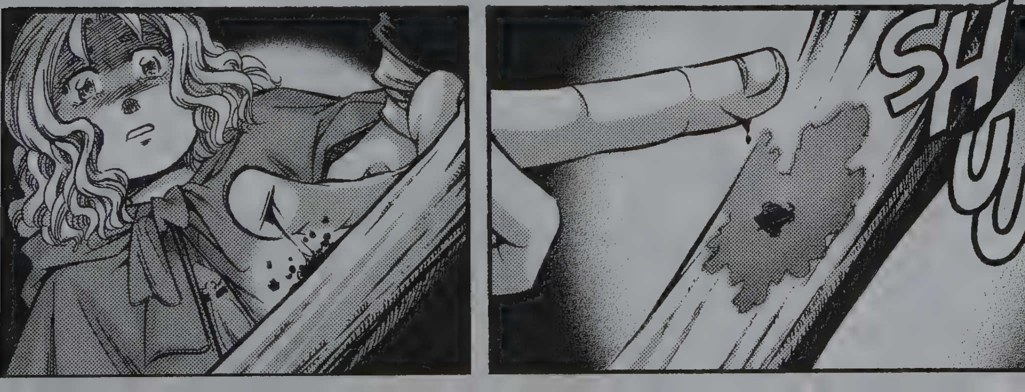
Grandmother lifted her head and spoke quietly. 'She is lying to protect me.'


GRANDMOTHER, WHY...?!
YOU, GIRL. *YOU* STILL NEED TO BE TESTED.
GIVE ME YOUR HAND!

Salinger's eyes took on a zealous glow as he spoke, one that was in stark contrast to his earlier, muted gaze. He raised his dagger and strode towards her, seizing her wrist and yanking her away from Bree. Celsia winced in pain, but bit her lip to hide it.

'Wait!' Grandmother shouted from the wagon. 'I've already confessed! You don't *need* to test her!' She pushed against the men holding her arms, to no avail.

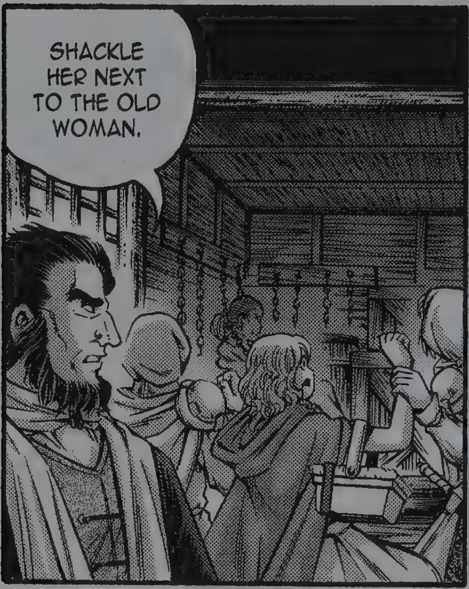
Salinger ignored her, while Celsia found herself transfixed by the metallic gleam of the dagger's edge. It had been dulled into a reddish-brown by the blood of the other villagers. Without hesitating, he sliced the dagger across the finger of her left hand, drawing blood.

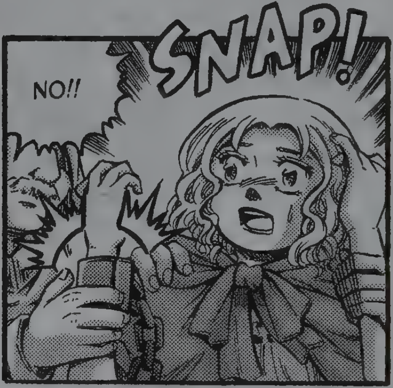


An acrid smell filled the air, and the bone in Salinger's hand turned a foul yellow-green. Celsia watched fascinated, the pain in her finger momentarily forgotten. She was shocked speechless.

But... Celsia's mind struggled to comprehend the implications. *But I'm not a—*

'Take her away too.' Strong hands seizing her brought her back to reality, and she was half-dragged to the waiting wagon. Her grandmother already sat shackled by chains to the walls, her face sad and resigned.


SHACKLE HER NEXT TO THE OLD WOMAN.

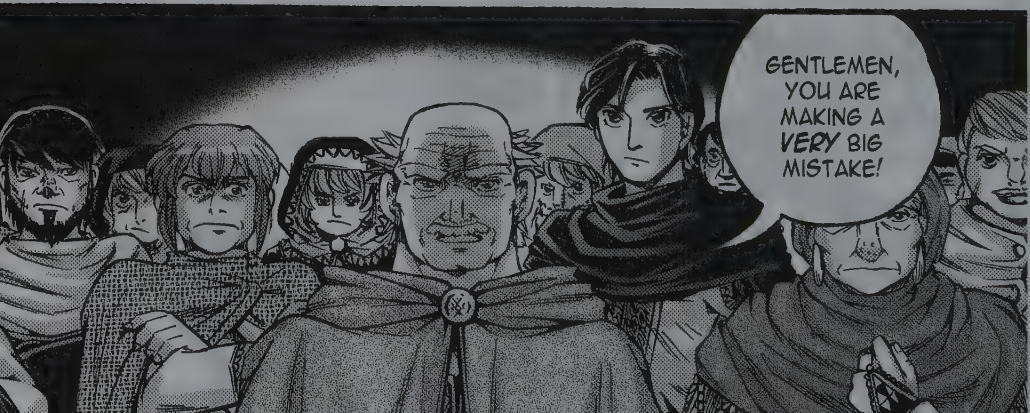


Men with hard, impassive faces snapped the iron manacles on her wrists, then pushed her sprawling into the darkness of the wagon. Celsia turned to see them close the thick wooden doors, panic rising within her as they bolted and locked the bars shut.

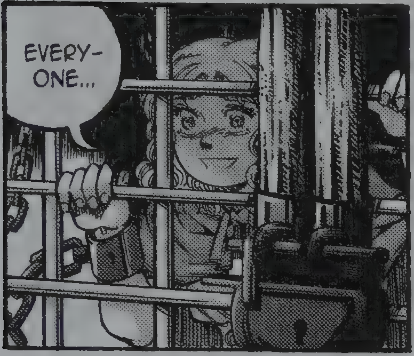
Wait! She wanted to shout. *This is all a big mistake! I'm not a—*

'Wait!'

Salinger and his men turned at the shouting voice.


GENTLEMEN, YOU ARE MAKING A *VERY* BIG MISTAKE!

Elder Drake came forward, flanked by Bree, Quillon, and the rest of the Drakes. Other villagers followed. Celsia spotted Tom on the far right, Hetty's nervous face, Troy Paxton and his family, and Big Jeb and Little Jeb. They marched up to Salinger and his men, who looked on warily. One even touched a hand to his sword belt.



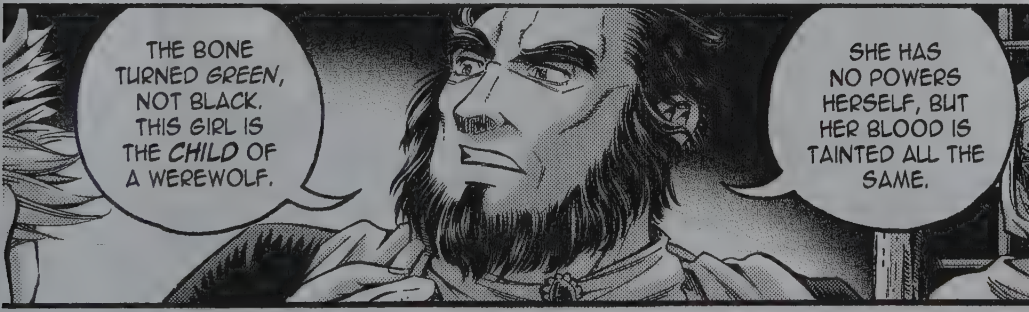
The Elder's voice rang loud and clear. 'Celsia and her grandmother have lived in our village since she was an infant. We've never had any trouble with them, nor with any *wolves*, for that matter.' He pushed his face close to Salinger's. 'You and your... *ilk*, sir, are simply mistaken. She's no werewolf, and your little blood and bone show proves nothing to those of us who have known her all her life.'

Salinger raised one eyebrow, his facade as cool as the Elder's. 'Since when did I say she was a werewolf?'

A drone of confused voices rose from the crowd. Heads swivelled, as villagers looked to each other for an explanation. Unnoticed by the others, Bree took this opportunity to sidle to the far side of the group.

Celsia peered from behind the latticed doors of the wagon, watching Bree as she sauntered up to one of Salinger's soldiers. It was a nervous young man, fidgeting with his sword belt.

Go, stepmother! Find some way to rescue us!

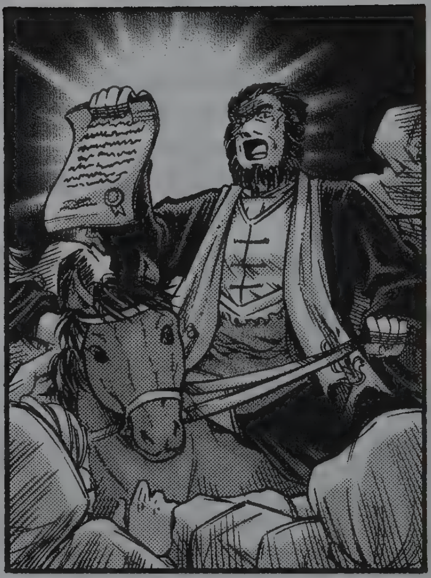

THE BONE TURNED GREEN, NOT BLACK. THIS GIRL IS THE *CHILD* OF A WEREWOLF.
SHE HAS NO POWERS HERSELF, BUT HER BLOOD IS TAINTED ALL THE SAME.

The Elder spluttered. 'If she has no powers, then—'

'As I said, she is *bone-tainted*. Her blood is impure, and she cannot be allowed to pass that bodily evil onto her children.'

'But you said you were hunting a *werewolf*—'

'*Enough!*'

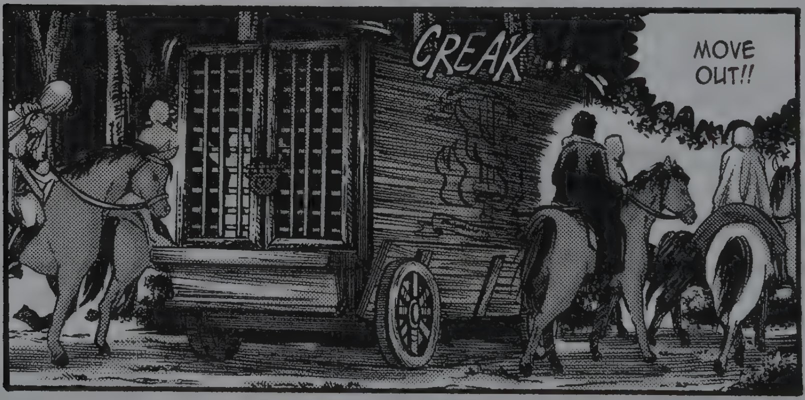


Salinger bellowed that last word, then leapt onto a horse that one of his soldiers had led to his side. Instantly, the villagers backed away, fearing the horse's lashing hooves. He reached into his robes and produced a thick piece of parchment, which he then waved officiously, spurring his horse on.

'Ignorant peasants who don't understand all the good work we do!' he shouted. 'If you want to challenge my decision, take it to your Council in Silversby! Men, move out!'

Celsia shrieked, as she felt the wagon she was in lurch forward. With her face pressed against the bars, she saw the villagers mill about, watching helplessly as the wagon left their village. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bree whispering furiously to the young soldier, now on his horse. He was accepting something Bree pushed into his hand.

A bribe! To find out where they are taking us.


CREAK ...
MOVE OUT!!

The light and noise of Hempshire began to fade, soon vanishing from view. The dark, surrounding forests swallowed them quietly, until the only sound she could hear was her own ragged breathing.

It was a long way from dawn.

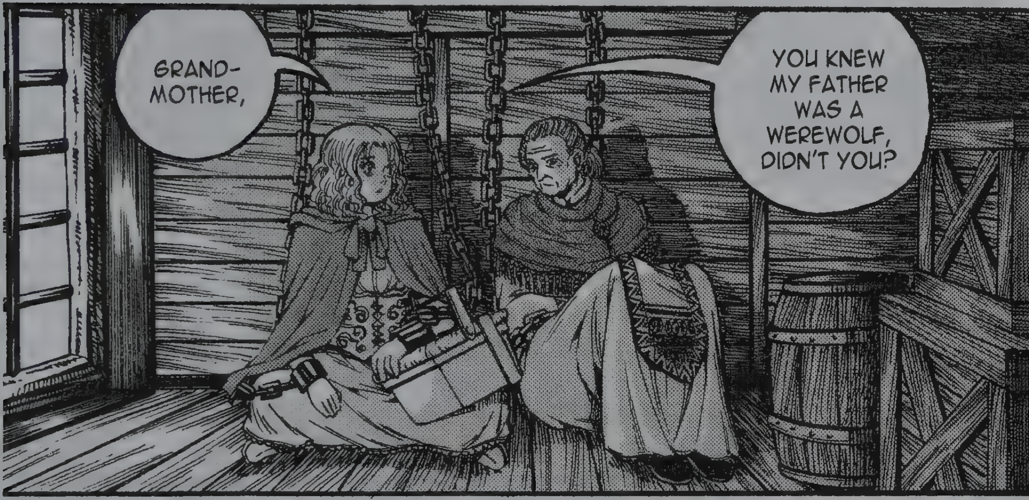
*****

The wagon stood still, perched awkwardly on the rocky path.

Travelling downhill with such a large wagon had been difficult, so the going had been slow. To Celsia's chagrin, the only sounds for the past half hour had been of Salinger's men chopping wood and making camp. They were unlikely to be moving any time soon.

Celsia sighed, giving the chains on her wrist one last yank. Trying to kick the doors apart was pointless, so she settled down next to her grandmother, who had been sitting in defeated silence all this time.

The old woman turned, and looked at the hamper on her arm.


GRAND-MOTHER,
YOU KNEW MY FATHER WAS A WEREWOLF, DIDN'T YOU?

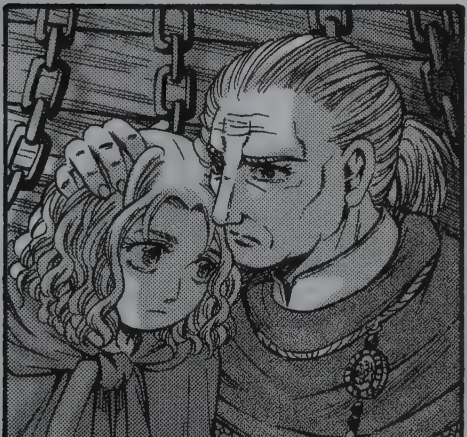
Her grandmother continued to stare at Celsia's hamper—lips pursed, jaw clenched. She showed no signs of having heard a word.

'That big wolf in the forest today. It was my... my *father*, wasn't it? That's why he didn't hurt me. My father, Lucerne.'

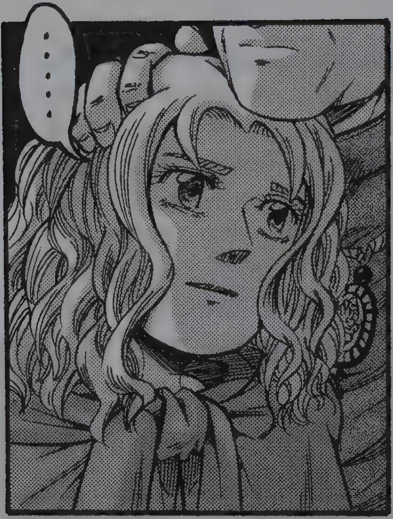
Silence.

'*Lucerne*, Grandmother. *Your son.*'

The word *son* appeared to break the spell, and her grandmother's eyes met hers. Lefrenia lifted her hand, and softly ran it through the mess of curls on Celsia's head, the way she sometimes did when Celsia was upset. She gently guided Celsia's head onto her shoulder, the bony hands stroking the tri-coloured locks.



'Celsia, my sweet child. You will be brave, won't you?' the old woman whispered.



Brave?

Yes, she will be brave. The way Grandmother Penny must have been brave, when she first discovered her own son to have that dreaded lupine disease. And it was unquestionably her father who had it. It couldn't have been her mother Rhys, currently sleeping on the outskirts of Hempshire under an unmarked gravestone she decorated with posies every year. Rhys was beautiful and frail, and had died giving birth to her in a river of blood. It was a trauma her father dealt with by fleeing their little village, rarely to return.

Celsia sighed, pressing her nose against her grandmother's shawl and breathing in her earthy aroma of herbs and spices. She may have been raised without a father, but she had never wanted for love. She had her stepmother, her grandmother, the Drake family and various others who loved and cared for her. Elder Drake, especially, had shown her that there were better, braver men in this world than her father.

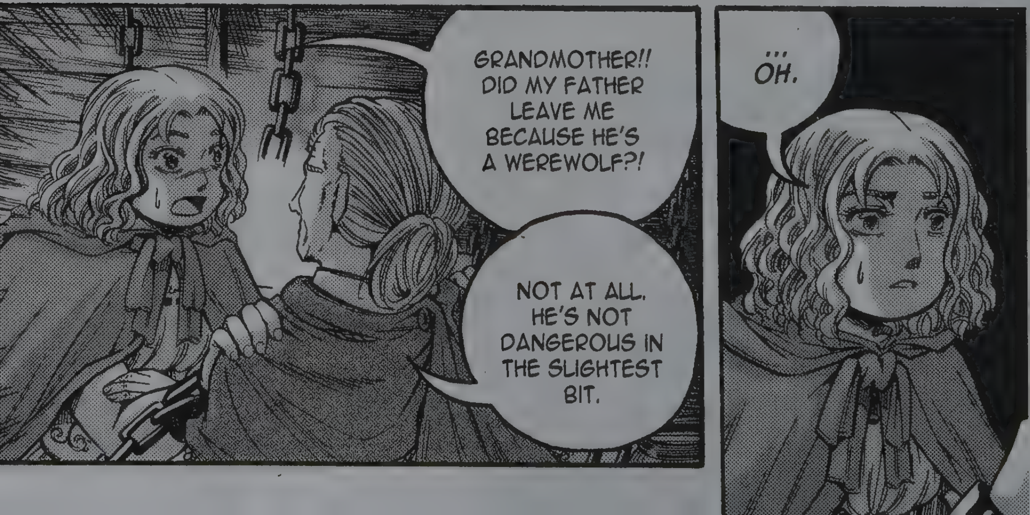
The old woman's hand grew tense, and untangled itself from Celsia's hair.

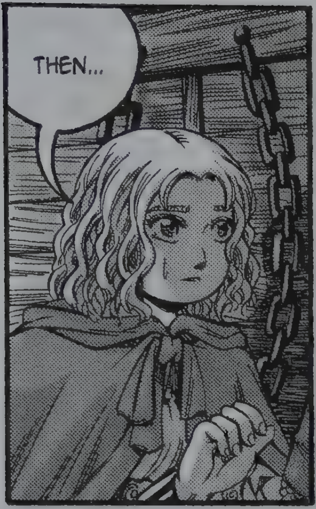
'It's your destiny, Celsia. You must be brave. You *must*.'

'I will be.' Celsia replied. 'You tried to protect me, Grandmother. From that Salinger—'

'Yes I did, and I failed. But things happen for a reason, and there is no stopping it when the wheel has started to turn.'

Wheel? Destiny? An epiphany suddenly entered Celsia's head.


GRANDMOTHER!! DID MY FATHER LEAVE ME BECAUSE HE'S A WEREWOLF?!
NOT AT ALL. HE'S NOT DANGEROUS IN THE SLIGHTEST BIT.
... OH.



'...did he leave because you and stepmother were afraid and... *ashamed* of him? Is that why neither of you ever talk about him?'

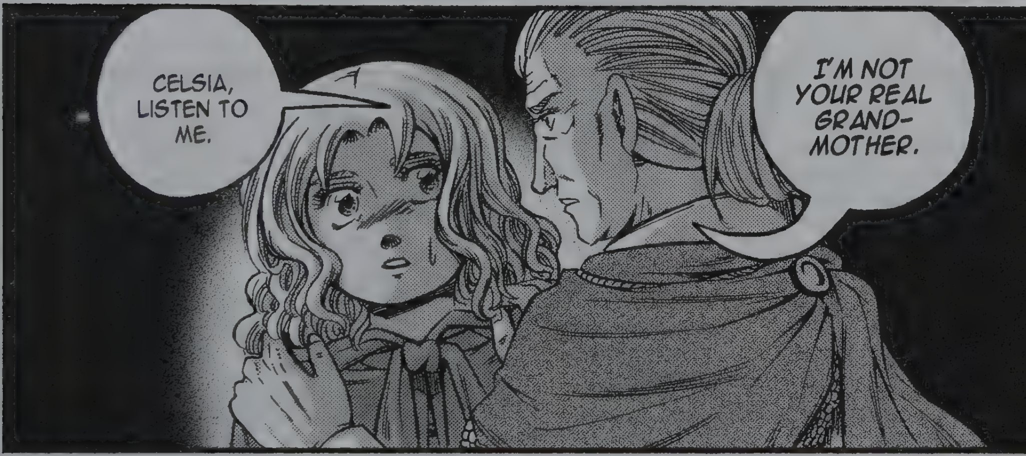
'*No!*' This reply was more forceful than the last, and her grandmother seemed to flare up uncharacteristically. Celsia shrank back, startled that she had hit such a sore point.

'Neither Bree nor I have *ever* been ashamed of Lucerne, or whatever is in his blood! As for you...' Her voice wavering, Grandmother suddenly reached out, grabbing her by the shoulders and looking her in the eye. '...You should never, *ever* be ashamed of your blood!'

Celsia nodded mutely, puzzled by her grandmother's sudden agitation. Lefrenia's face was on the verge of crumbling.

'Grandmother?'

'*It's time...*' Grandmother's voice was so low, it was a whisper.

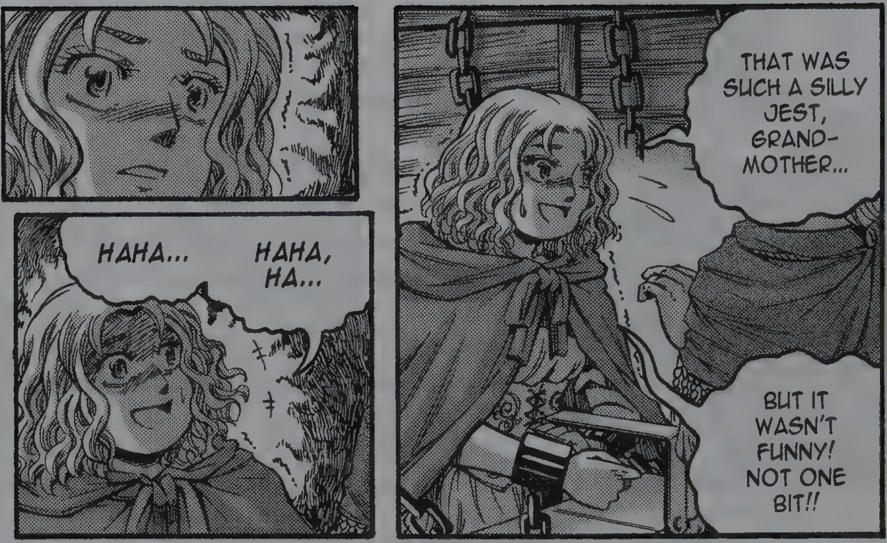

I'M NOT YOUR REAL GRAND-MOTHER.
CELSIA, LISTEN TO ME.

Celsia blinked, staring at her grandmother with uncomprehending eyes. 'What?'

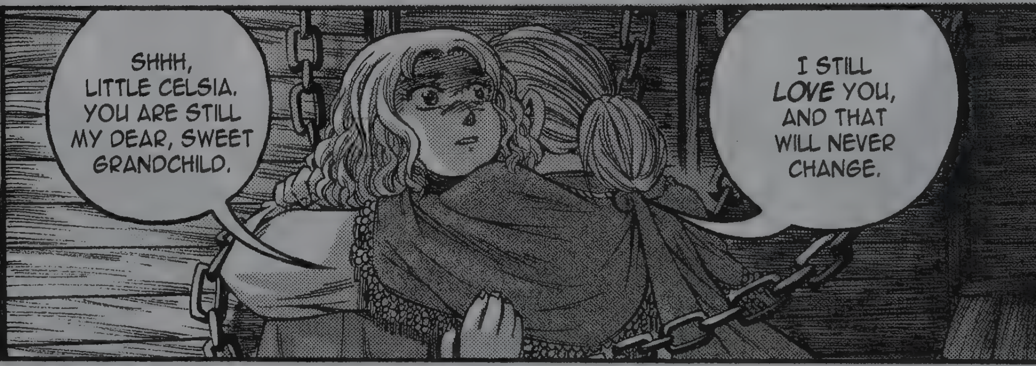
'I said, *I am not your trueborn grandmother.* Lucerne is indeed your father by blood, but he is not my son. I have never birthed a child from my body, and we are not related by blood."

'*What?*' Celsia repeated, dumbly. '*What*? But—'

'It's true, Celsia.' Her grandmother said quietly. 'I'm sorry.' Her voice was soft and gentle, but raw with honesty. *Finality*, even.


HAHA... HAHA, HA...
THAT WAS SUCH A SILLY JEST, GRANDMOTHER...
BUT IT WASN'T FUNNY! NOT ONE BIT!!

Her voice was trembling, as was her entire body. She tried to stop it, but try as she did, she couldn't. Her grandmother responded by pulling her into a tight embrace, hushing her and stroking her hair. These were gestures meant to be comforting, but now they just felt... *odd*.


SHHH, LITTLE CELSIA. YOU ARE STILL MY DEAR, SWEET GRANDCHILD.
I STILL *LOVE* YOU, AND THAT WILL NEVER CHANGE.

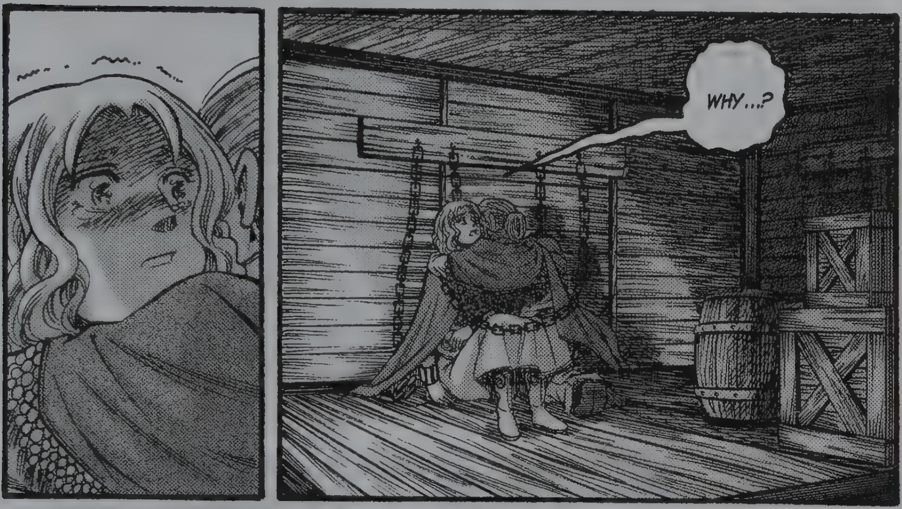
Love?

Celsia tried to relax in her grandmother's arms, despite her heart thumping fast and her breath catching in her throat. It was true she had the love of many and had never felt deprived, but it was always the love of her grandmother she craved the most.

Her stepmother may be wonderful, but Lefrenia was her *blood* relative; a living, breathing link to the land she lived on. This was a bond forged in the womb, one that could not be easily broken. This was true even if her father, the missing link in the chain, was absent.

Certainly, that was *partly* why she became a healer, wasn't it? It was why she chose her grandmother's path over her stepmother's vocation. Instead of seeing the world, she had made a decision that would have tied her and her whole future to the Five Shires.

The Red Hood of the Healer, red for blood...



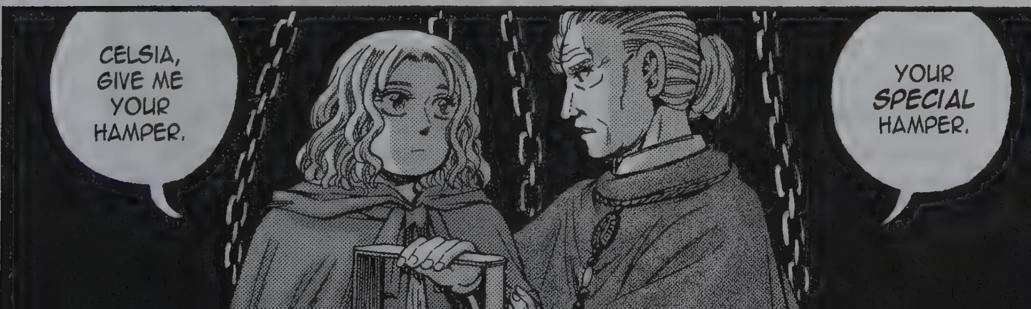
Finally, she sobbed fitfully, as her grandmother held her close. It was all a lie. She didn't have a *single* blood relative in Hempshire, never had, and much of what she believed in had never been true.

'I had to do it, to protect you. Remember it always, no matter where you will go, or what you will become. It's your *destiny.*'

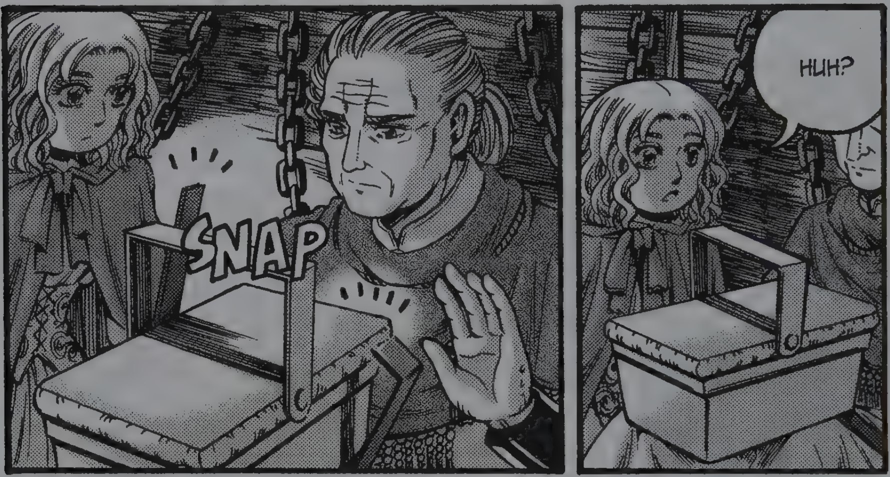
That word again. They sat in silence for a long time, with her grandmother stroking her hair and issuing soothing murmurs. As she listened to the soft whispers, Celsia was reminded of happier, less complicated times. She had always found such warm comfort in her grandmother's bosom, whether she was in tears over her skinned knees, or bullying by children from the other villages.

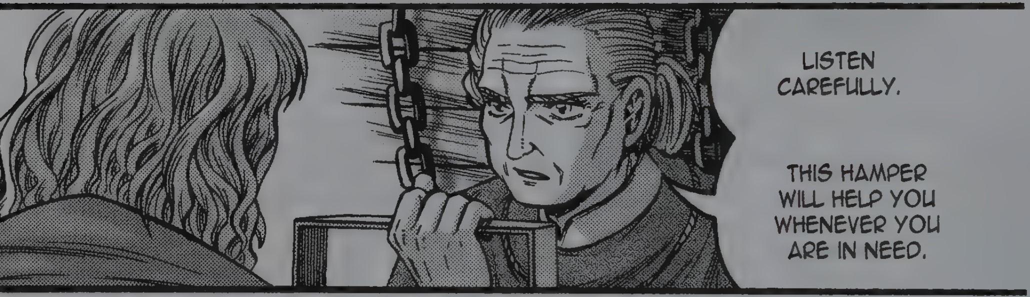
Blood ties are not all that there is.

Her grandmother was still her grandmother, much like Bree was like her *real* mother. She had raised Celsia as her own, and that was all that mattered. *Should* matter.


CELSIA, GIVE ME YOUR HAMPER.
YOUR SPECIAL HAMPER.

Wordlessly, Celsia lifted her hamper from the crook of her arm and handed it over. Her grandmother placed her fingers on the metal band encircling one-half of the hamper, and whispered a few words.



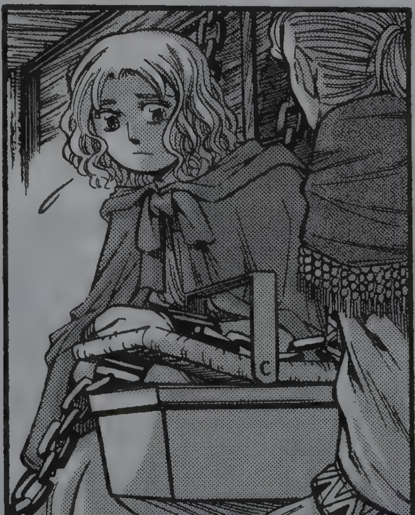

LISTEN CAREFULLY.
THIS HAMPER WILL HELP YOU WHENEVER YOU ARE IN NEED.

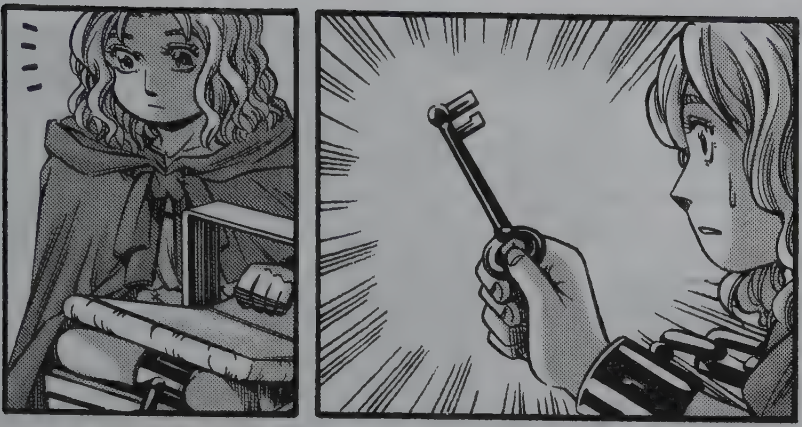
'Tell it what you want, then reach into it. It will give you what you desire. Here, try it now.'

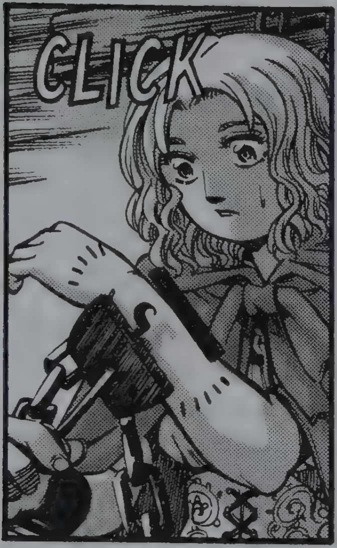
Her grandmother pushed the hamper back into Celsia's hands, eyes fervent.

'Try it. Get us out of here.'

'Oh grandmother, we need the keys for that.' Celsia shook her head, reaching into the basket she has known every inch of since she was ten. *The stress of the situation has finally made Grandmother go batty,* she thought to herself.







The heavy iron cuffs fell away from her wrists, and she quickly freed her grandmother.

Rubbing her sore joints to regain some circulation, she then inserted the key into the padlock binding the doors of the wagon. It turned smoothly with a soft *click*, causing the lock to spring open.

'What *is* this? How is this even…?!' Celsia sat back in wonder, staring first at the key, then at her hamper.

'When you're done, always return the item to the hamper. It will aid you in the long, harsh journey ahead of you.'

Long? Harsh? The choice of words caused no small sense of unease to Celsia, but her grandmother had already risen to her feet. The old woman started pushing experimentally against the doors, straining to listen for the footfalls of any patrolling guards.

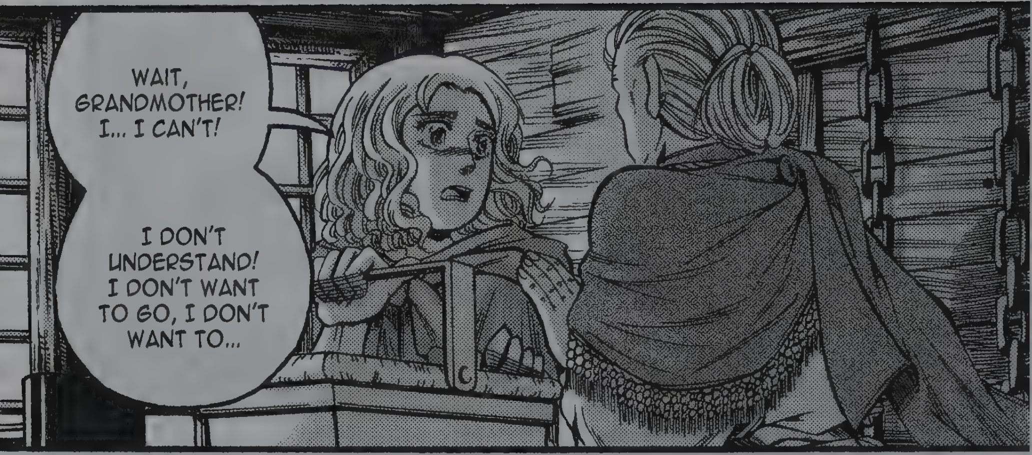
'Remember: only use the basket if a *real* need arises. It's best to use it for simple things like food, water, and other necessities, but if possible, always return whatever you have taken from it. Do not ever, *ever* let the hamper leave your side, for only you can use it.'

Celsia slipped the key back into her basket, watching it fall into the depths of its dark interior. There was no soft, thudding sound.

Nothing. The key was gone, vanished into ether.

'Eek!! Grandmother!'

The old woman had hauled Celsia to her feet, and was keenly pressing her towards the wagon doors. 'Now *go*, child! There is no one outside at the moment!'

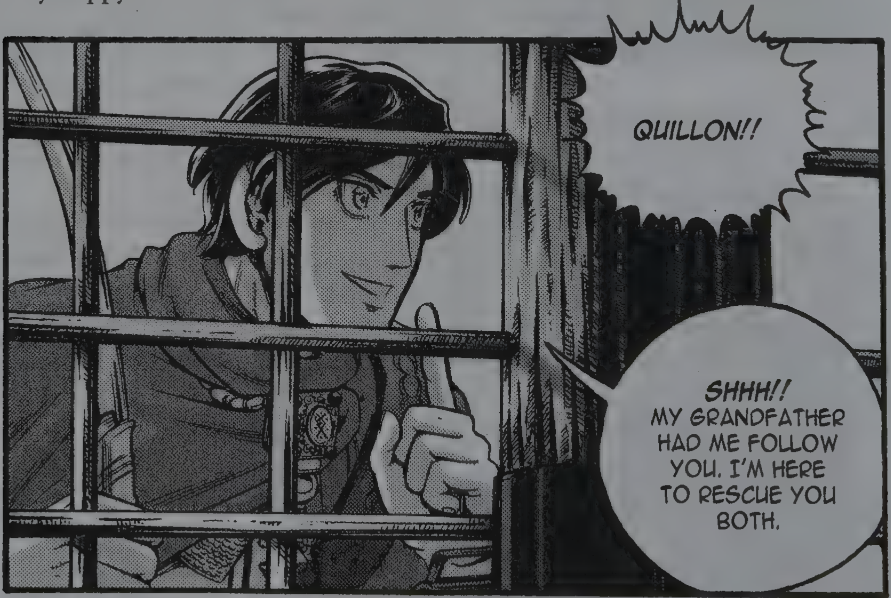

WAIT, GRANDMOTHER! I... I CAN'T!
I DON'T UNDERSTAND! I DON'T WANT TO GO, I DON'T WANT TO...

All this strange talk of *destiny* and *harsh journeys* frightened her, and she found herself whimpering her protests. Still, she held her hamper close, allowing her grandmother to crowd her to the exit.

'I'll explain later, after we leave this wagon. Now quickly—'

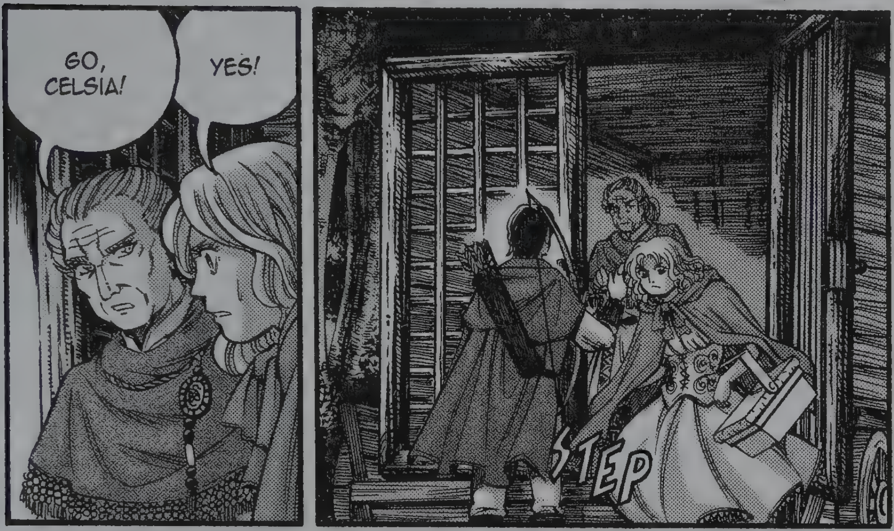
'*Psst!!*'

Grandmother froze, while Celsia leapt back from the wagon door as if it were a burning brand. The hiss was low and urgent, emanating from the blackness beyond the gates of their small wooden prison. A dark human shape had appeared, and Celsia squinted to see its face, wary of whom it may be. A sliver of moonlight then fell from the dense forest foliage, revealing the pale blue eyes of someone she was very happy to see.


QUILLON!!
SHHH!! MY GRANDFATHER HAD ME FOLLOW YOU. I'M HERE TO RESCUE YOU BOTH.

'I've been watching Salinger and his men for the past half hour. They're sitting by the fire and utterly distracted, so there's no better time. I'll take you both into the woods, to hide for the time being.'

Quillon's eyes shone, illuminated by that thin slice of moonlight. He gave a reassuring smile at the apprehensive looks on their faces. 'Have no fear. I know these woods as well as the back of my hand.'

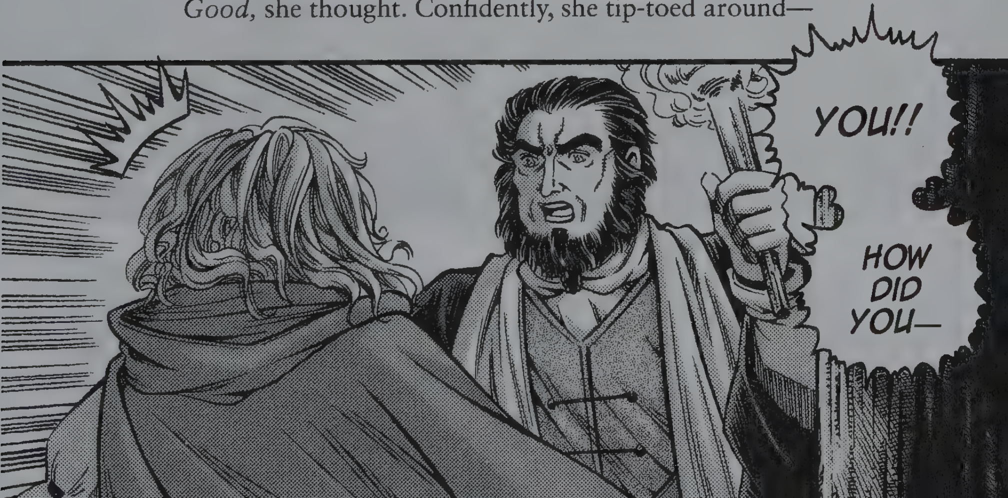

GO, CELSIA!
YES!
STEP

Celsia's boots hit the rocky path with a soft *thud*, as Quillon reached into the wagon to help her grandmother down. If he had been pleasantly surprised by the open padlock (and iron manacles) that once held them captive, he didn't show it. All his concentration was focused on the old woman leaning heavily on his arm.

Looking over her shoulder to ensure that her grandmother was safe, Celsia peered around the left side of the wagon.

Nothing. Just dark shadows and empty space.

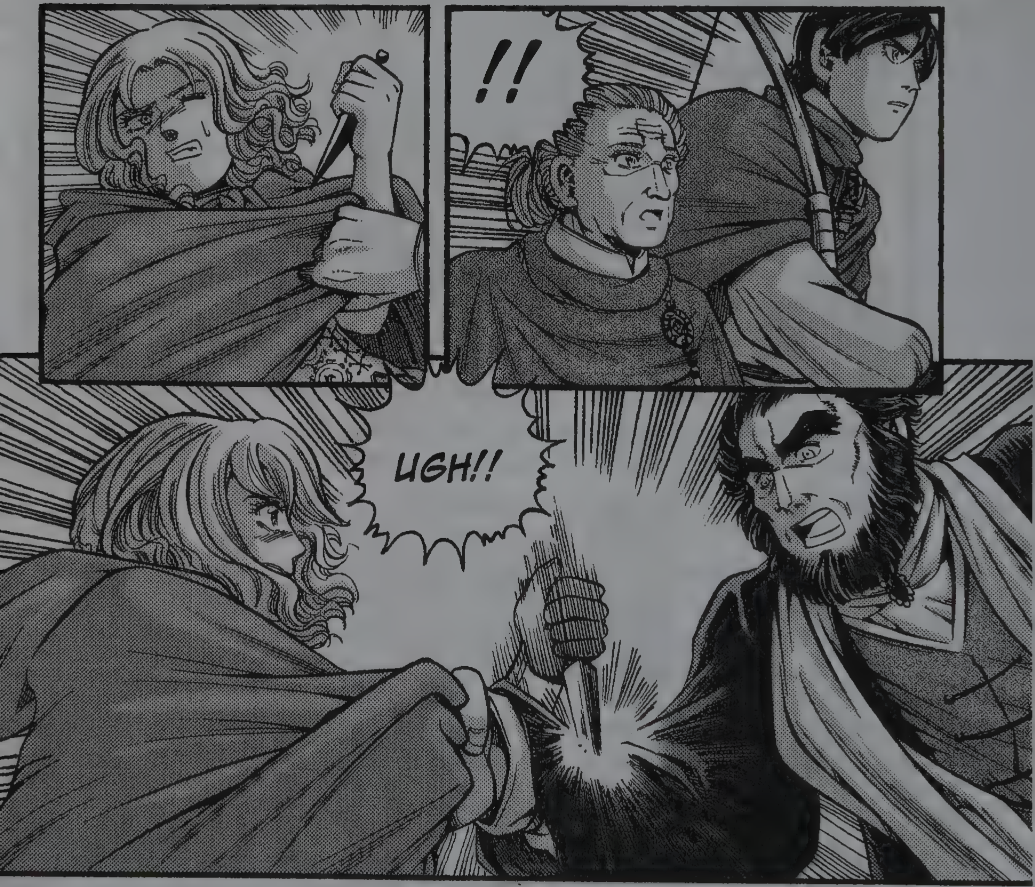
Good, she thought. Confidently, she tip-toed around—


YOU!!
HOW DID YOU—

Salinger!

The sudden glow of torch light blinded her, and she stood disoriented for a moment. Behind her came a soft gasp of dismay, as Quillon and Lefrenia had been following her lead. They bumped into her, pushing her directly towards the priest who had materialised like a ghost in the night.

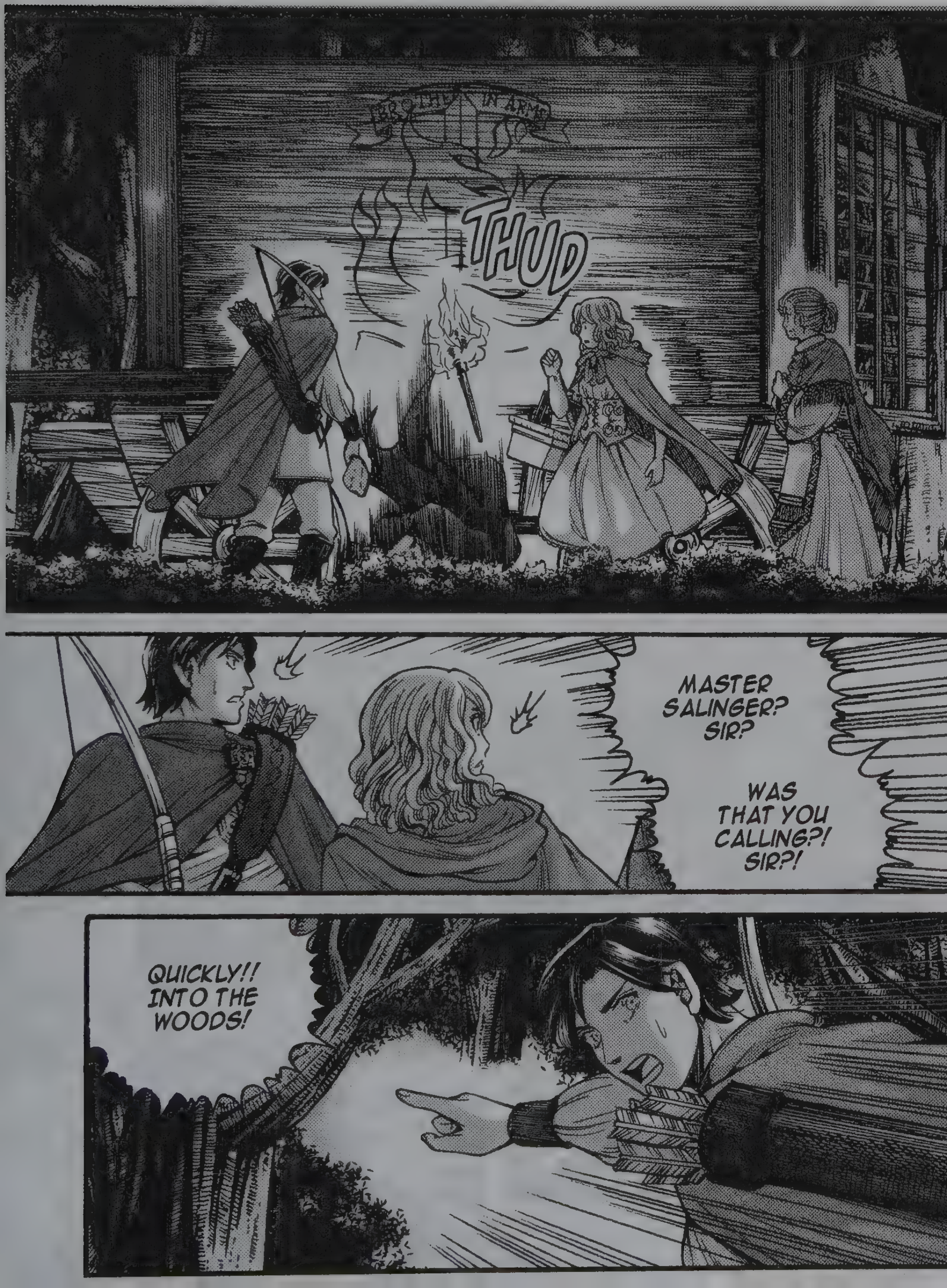
Don't touch me! You'll regret it! her mind screamed, more out of defiance than fear. Salinger's hand shot out, roughly grabbing her by her cloak. Celsia's own hand, meanwhile, had reached into a small pocket of her red hood, where it closed around the dagger she always carried with her.



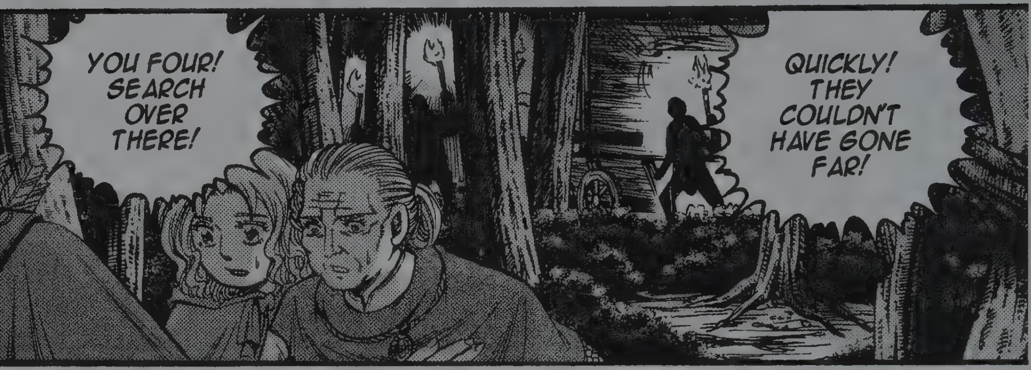
The dagger sank like teeth into his arm, and he gave a high-pitched howl of pain. Still, he refused to release her, even as the warm, wet spray of his blood caused her fingers to slip off the dagger.

THOK!!

Salinger's arm slackened, and he lost his grip. Quillon had stepped around the struggling pair, and slammed a rock into the side of the priest's head. He did not seem to have used his full strength, but the blow rendered the man unconscious. He fell silently.


BROTHE IN ARMS
THUD
MASTER SALINGER? SIR?
WAS THAT YOU CALLING?! SIR?!
QUICKLY!! INTO THE WOODS!

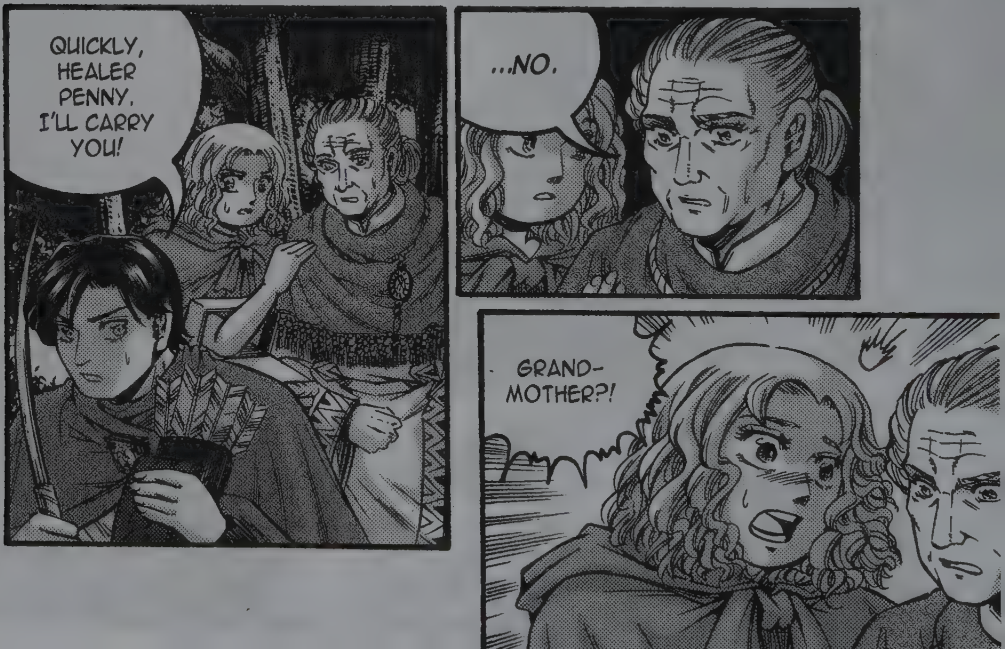
The three of them fled into the darkness of the surrounding forests, with Quillon ahead while Celsia aided her grandmother. Behind them, more shouts continued to erupt. They may have gained some distance, but by now, both Salinger and the empty wagon would have been discovered.


YOU FOUR! SEARCH OVER THERE!
QUICKLY! THEY COULDN'T HAVE GONE FAR!

Celsia kicked stones and branches out of her way, holding her grandmother with one arm while struggling to keep pace with Quillon. Flickering rays of light darted through the trees at their backs, seeming to nip at their heels. It was clear that all of Salinger's men were now in the woods, organising themselves into groups and searching for them.

'Come on, Grandmother.' Celsia whispered encouragingly, as the old woman had begun to pant and wheeze. 'It's just a little further.'

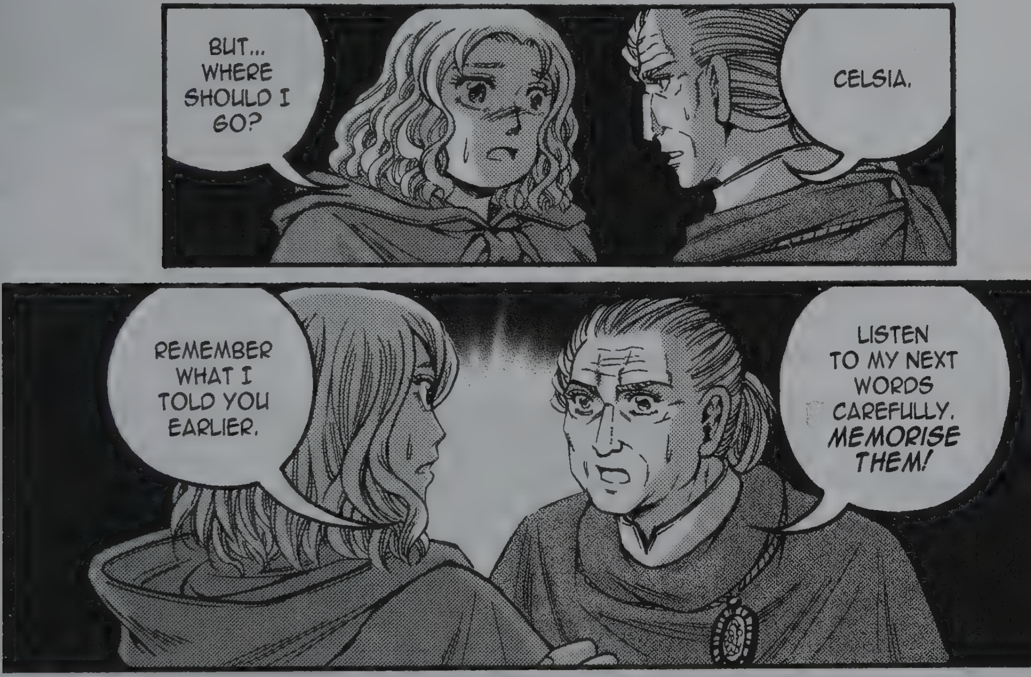
Quillon had retraced his steps. He unbuckled his quiver from his chest and knelt down in front of Lefrenia, his back facing her.


QUICKLY, HEALER PENNY, I'LL CARRY YOU!
...NO.
GRAND-MOTHER?!

'*I said no!*' Lefrenia snapped, wrenching her arm away from Celsia's grasp. 'I'm *old*, Celsia. I'll only slow you and Quillon down. You two must continue on without me. If they find me, they will not search so hard for you.'

'*No!*' Celsia cried. Quillon's eyebrows shot up, but he didn't straighten from his position. 'We won't leave you behind! What will they do to you when they catch you?!'

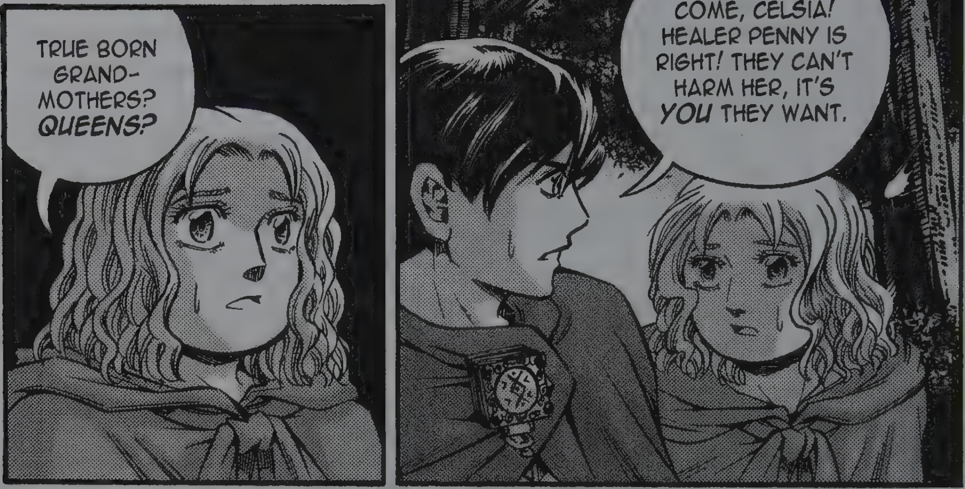
Her grandmother's voice was surprisingly calm. 'They will, and can, do *nothing*. I have not a drop of werewolf blood in me. They will eventually have to let me go, even if they take me back to their monastery. But you? They will hurt *you*! They must not catch *you!*'


BUT... WHERE SHOULD I GO?
CELSIA.
REMEMBER WHAT I TOLD YOU EARLIER.
LISTEN TO MY NEXT WORDS CAREFULLY. *MEMORISE THEM!*

*'You have **two true born grandmothers**, both queens.*

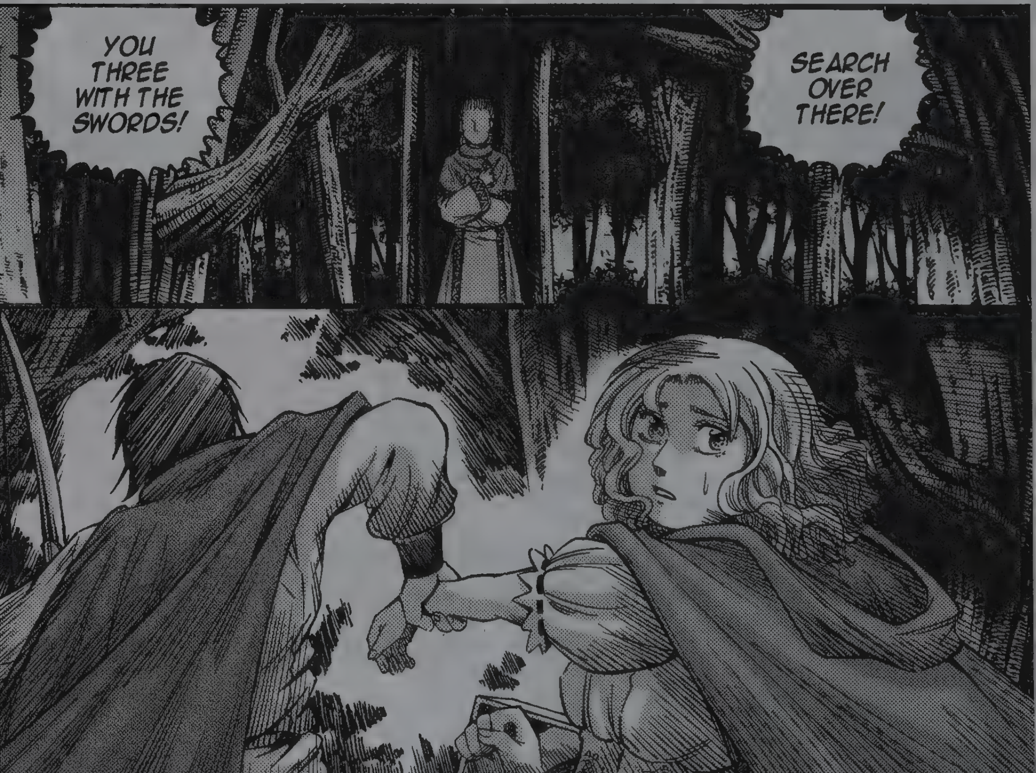
*One is **Black**, the other **White**;*
*One is **Young**, the other **Old**;*
*One is **Good**, the other **Evil**.*

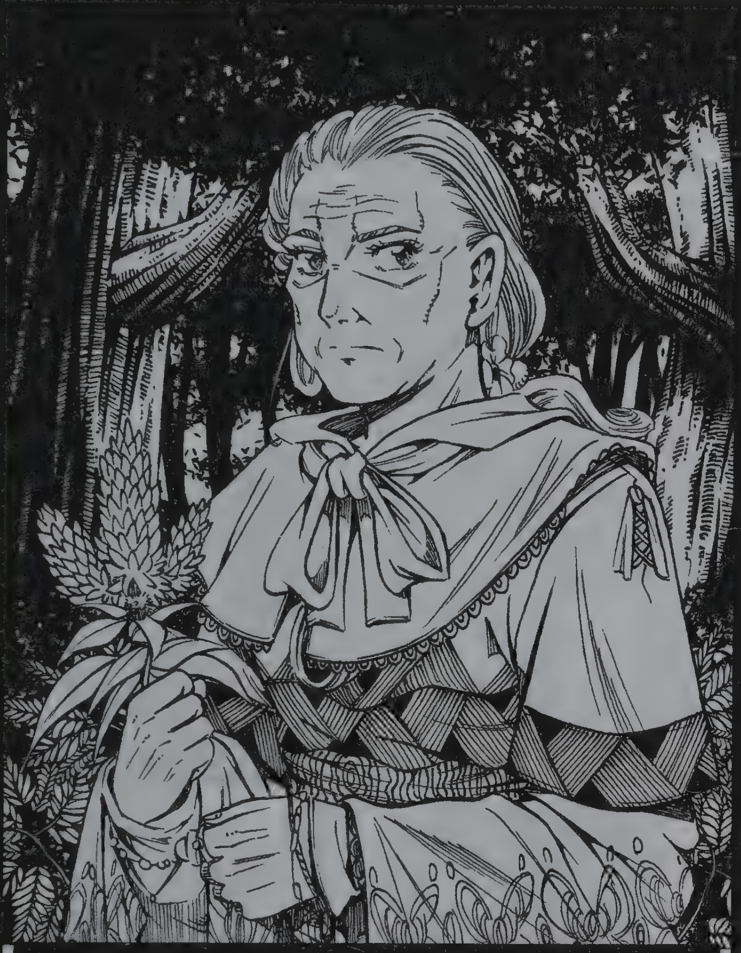
*Seek the first in the **Fabled Kingdom of Fallinor**,*
and she shall deliver you to your destiny.'


TRUE BORN GRAND-MOTHERS? *QUEENS?*
COME, CELSIA! HEALER PENNY IS RIGHT! THEY CAN'T HARM HER, IT'S *YOU* THEY WANT.

Celsia's fingers slipped from her grandmother's shawl. Quillon's hand gripped hers, pulling her away from the old woman. Looking over her shoulder, she let him lead her deep into the woods, watching passively as the twisted branches and tree trunks moved past.

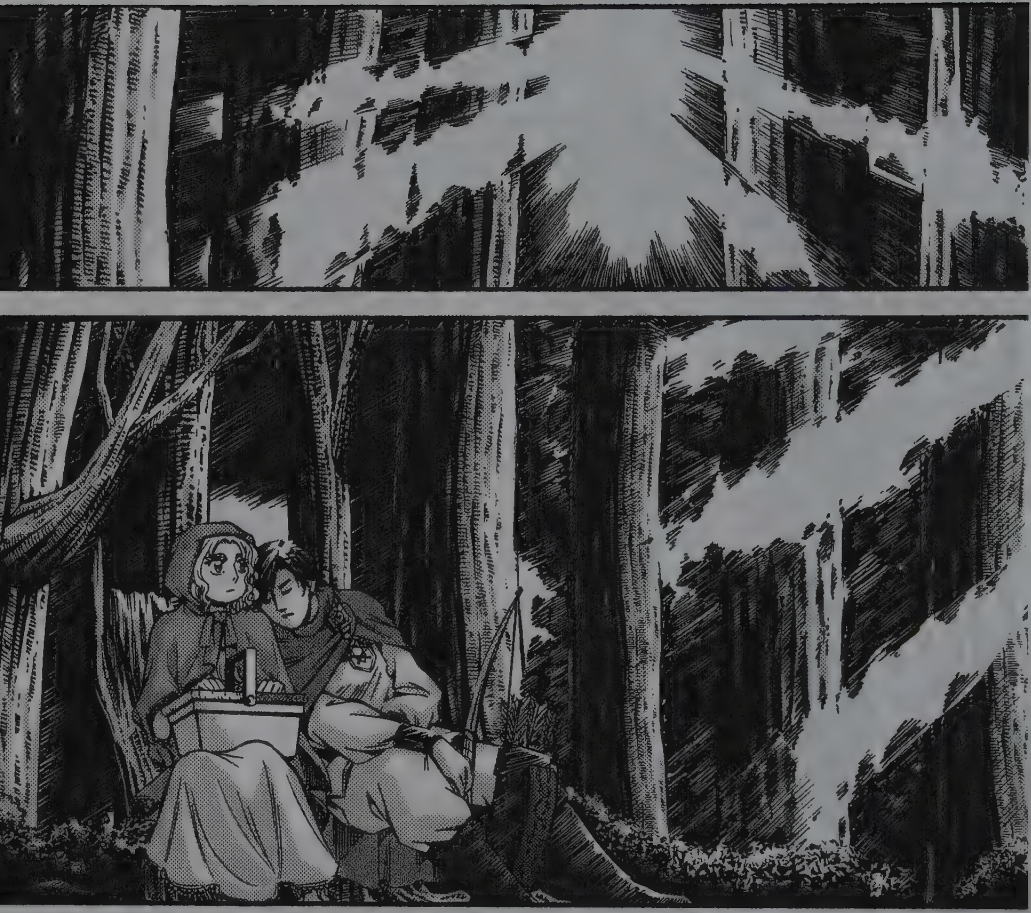
Her grandmother's figure was fading fast. Within moments, it had vanished into the darkness, obscured by a sea of forest brush. The next Celsia looked, she was gone.

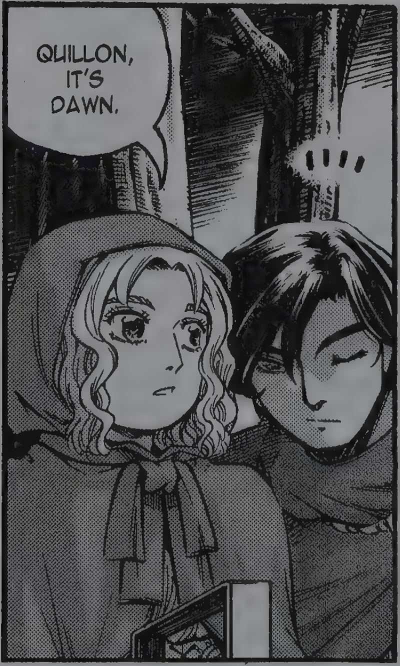

YOU THREE WITH THE SWORDS!
SEARCH OVER THERE!



3: THE SILVER PATH

BY QUEENIE CHAN

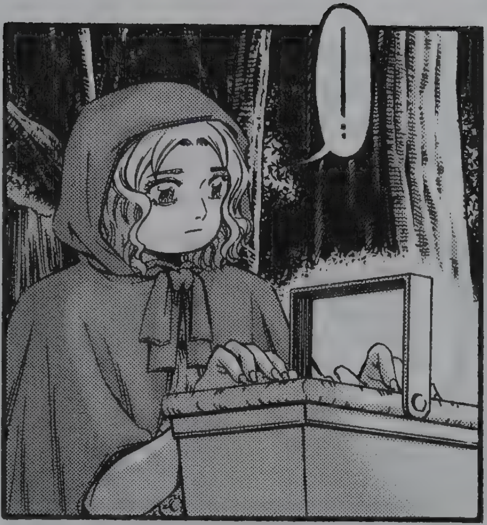



QUILLON, IT'S DAWN.

Quillon rose smoothly to his feet, and quickly began to scout their surroundings. Celsia watched him in silence, a roving silhouette framed by the soft morning light.

No one else is here, Quillon, she thought. *We're all alone.*

She felt strangely calm. Even though the events of the previous night were still fresh in her mind, the shock of the situation was diminishing with each passing hour. Now, all that remained were words, her grandmother's last words to her, echoing in the dark.

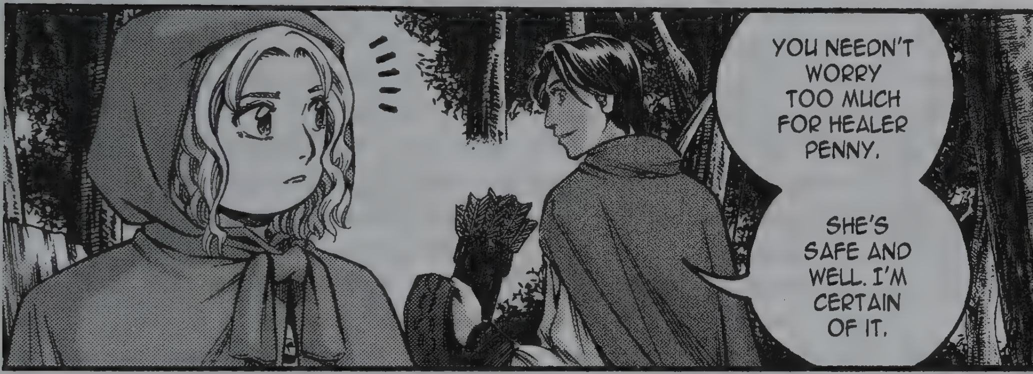


Celsia looked at the hamper perched on her knee, slowly running her hands around it. There was once a metal band binding one of its two lids shut, but now her fingers could only trace its absence.

So many things, lost in the space of one night.

And yet, she had gained a few things too. Her old hamper had been re-made anew, and she had acquired two new grandmothers through the one she lost. She had many other questions, but right now, her first concern was where to go from here.

I can't possibly go back to Hempshire.



YOU NEEDN'T WORRY TOO MUCH FOR HEALER PENNY.
SHE'S SAFE AND WELL. I'M CERTAIN OF IT.

'Yes.' Celsia replied, smiling. Her grandmother wasn't the one who'd stabbed Salinger. Knowing her, she would have surrendered herself quietly, becoming a model prisoner. They'd release her soon enough.

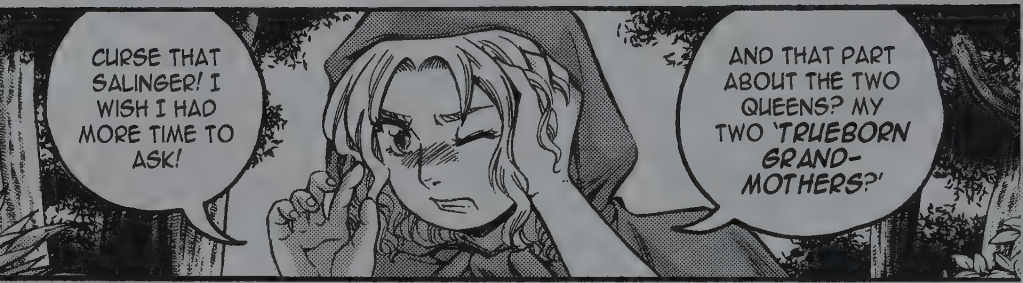
But Celsia? No doubt Salinger would go storming to the Council in Silversby, demanding retribution for that *wolf-girl* who had so viciously *bit* him on the arm. He'd cause trouble for everyone in her village, and may even attempt to sabotage her stepmother's businesses in Reversby and Loguetown...

'Celsia.' Quillon said. 'What your grandmother told you.'

Celsia looked at him, her eyes serious. '*Fallinor.* The Fabled Kingdom.'

'Isn't that one of the Northern Kingdoms?' Quillon asked. 'I think I've heard you mention it before.'

'Yes, but to my knowledge, Fallinor was destroyed over half a century ago,' Celsia said. She sat in pensive silence for a while, before running a hand through her hair, ruffling it in frustration.


CURSE THAT SALINGER! I WISH I HAD MORE TIME TO ASK!
AND THAT PART ABOUT THE TWO QUEENS? MY TWO *'TRUEBORN GRANDMOTHERS?'*

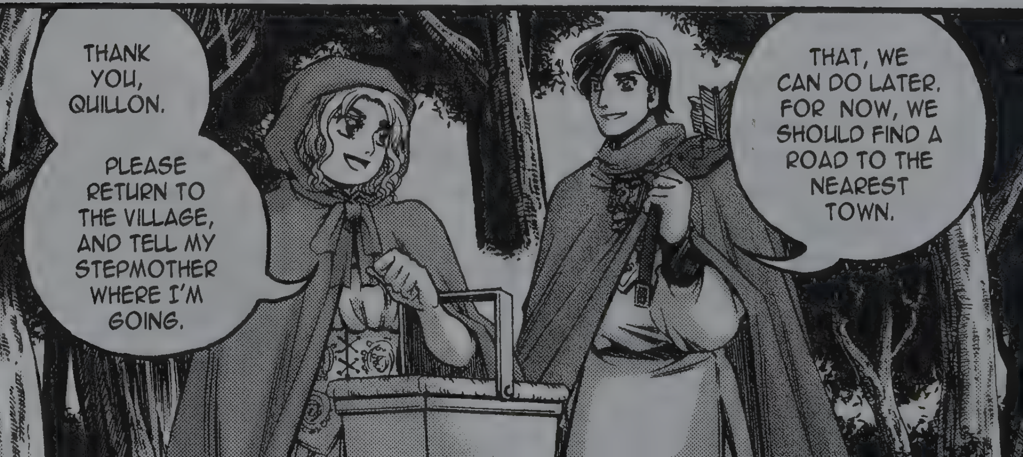
'I don't understand any of that! Is it even true?!'

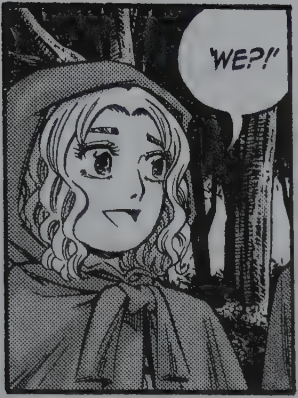
Quillon gave her a level gaze. 'Healer Penny is not one to make such statements lightly,' he said, his voice confident. 'She would not have sacrificed herself in such a manner, were it not truly important.'

'That's true,' Celsia murmured. The events of last night might have had the surreal quality of a nightmare, but her grandmother's intensity had been indisputable. Lefrenia's words, bright with conviction, had cast the outlines of everything else into a blurry haze.

It certainly cut through all possible objections Celsia's mind could raise. Travelling to Fallinor may seem like a pointless journey to find a destroyed kingdom, but she had reason to believe that there was more to the story. Bizarre or not, her grandmother had given her a quest—one so important, she sacrificed herself so that Celsia could escape.

'There is no denying the seriousness of the situation,' Celsia said, turning to Quillon. Her face was suddenly filled with a fierce determination. 'Destroyed or not, I ought to try and find a way to Fallinor. I cannot return to Hempshire after all.'


THANK YOU, QUILLON.
PLEASE RETURN TO THE VILLAGE, AND TELL MY STEPMOTHER WHERE I'M GOING.
THAT, WE CAN DO LATER. FOR NOW, WE SHOULD FIND A ROAD TO THE NEAREST TOWN.



Celsia let out a laugh, her eyebrows raised. 'Normally, *you* would be rousing Elder Drake from bed at this moment! Shouldn't you go home? He will miss you dearly.'

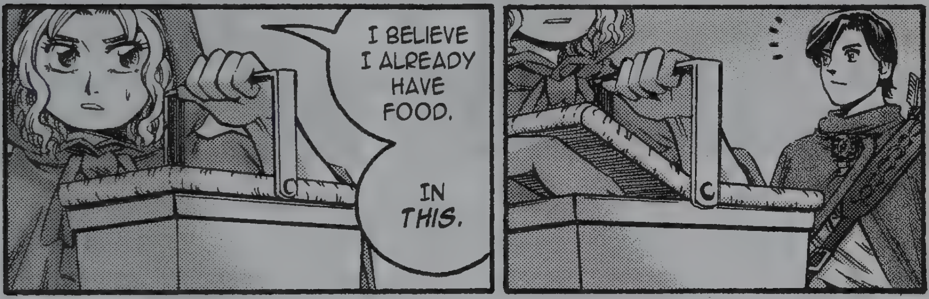
'My grandfather charged me with keeping you safe,' Quillon replied. 'I cannot go back without you, so if you wish to travel, I shall accompany you. As for Healer Penny, we can send messenger pigeons once we reach a larger town. My grandfather and your stepmother will track her down and find her.'

'I—' Celsia felt a sudden wave of exhaustion, and her whole body sagged. She was too tired to argue. '—agree completely.'

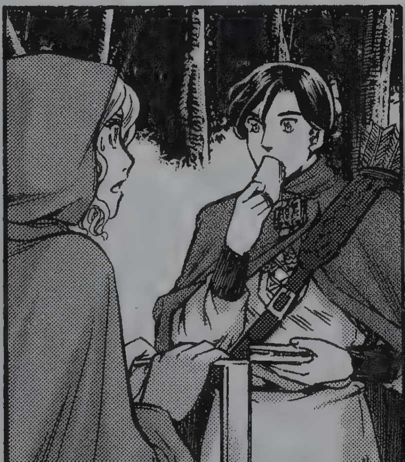
Quillon judged her wobbly legs with a discerning eye. 'Normally, *you* would be feasting on a breakfast buffet at this moment. Wait here, I shall try and hunt some game. I'm starving too.'

At the mention of food, Celsia glanced at her basket.

'*Wait!*'


I BELIEVE I ALREADY HAVE FOOD.
IN THIS.

She felt her hand expand inside the hamper, her palm filling with something solid. She then withdrew her hand, offering the ham and lettuce sandwich she now held to Quillon.



'That's a surprise,' he said, with one eyebrow raised. Nonetheless, he accepted the sandwich and bit a mouthful. 'Delicious!' he exclaimed, chewing.

Celsia watched him in rapt silence, hand tingling. She looked down at her Super Special Hamper, the proof before her very eyes.

It's real. It's magical. Her head spun with the possibilities.

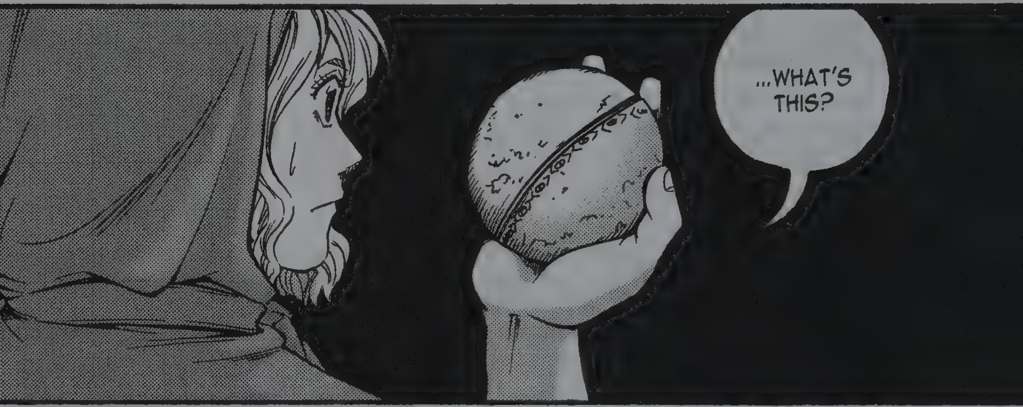
That's right. Grandmother had told me to 'seek my destiny.' I can use my hamper, and save myself a whole lot of trouble!

'What about you?' Quillon asked, still eating contentedly. 'Are you not hungry? I saved half for you.'

'No,' Celsia whispered, her voice low and trembling with excitement. In a moment, he would be utterly amazed, sandwich all but forgotten. She cleared her throat, braced herself, and then reached into her hamper.

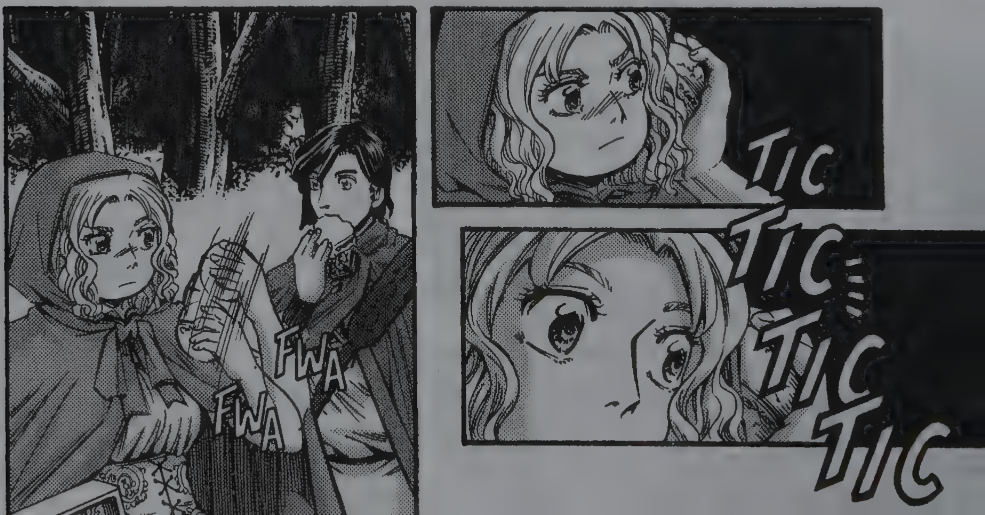
'Give me something that will take me to my destiny!'

Again, she felt her hand expand and fill up with something. She triumphantly pulled it from the basket.



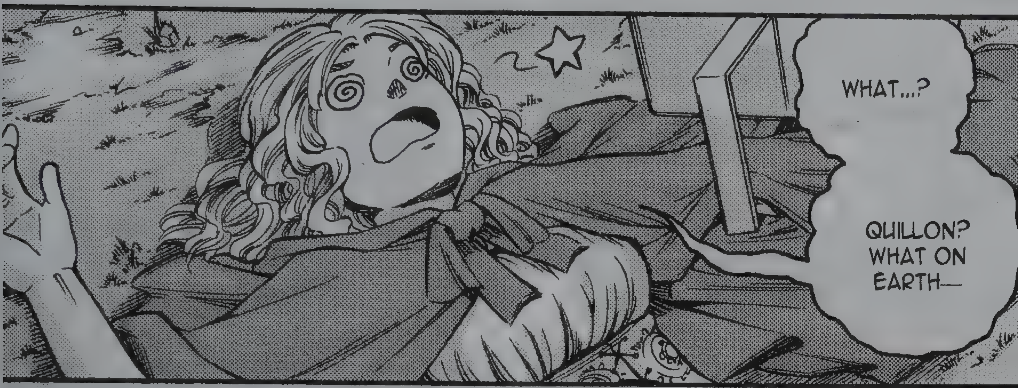
Her dramatic attempt at magic almost made Quillon stop eating. He watched her examine the orb she had pulled from her basket. It was like a ball of plaster, but with a ring of foreign-looking letters on it.

'What *is* that?' he finally said. 'What else have you packed in there?' Celsia stayed silent, her cheeks turning a pale pink.



BOOM!!

A blinding shower of sparks threw her off her feet. Immediately after, she felt the *thump* of her back hitting solid ground.


WHAT...?
QUILLON? WHAT ON EARTH—

Eyes bleary, Celsia sat up. Blinking, she was startled by what she saw. All the trees surrounding her earlier seemed to have jumped back ten yards. She was in an unfamiliar forest clearing.

Where was Quillon?

She looked around frantically, calling for him, but she was all alone in this strange, new place. Fear summoned to mind her last moments; the exploding orb, Quillon crying her name, *and then...*

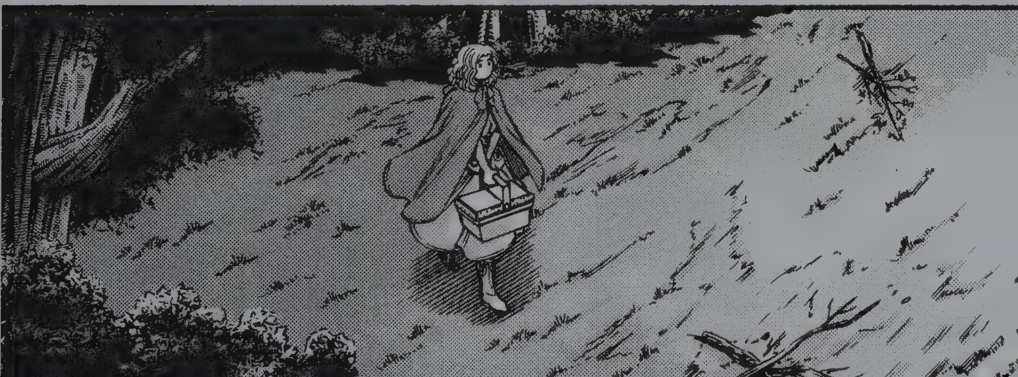
I didn't kill Quillon, did I?

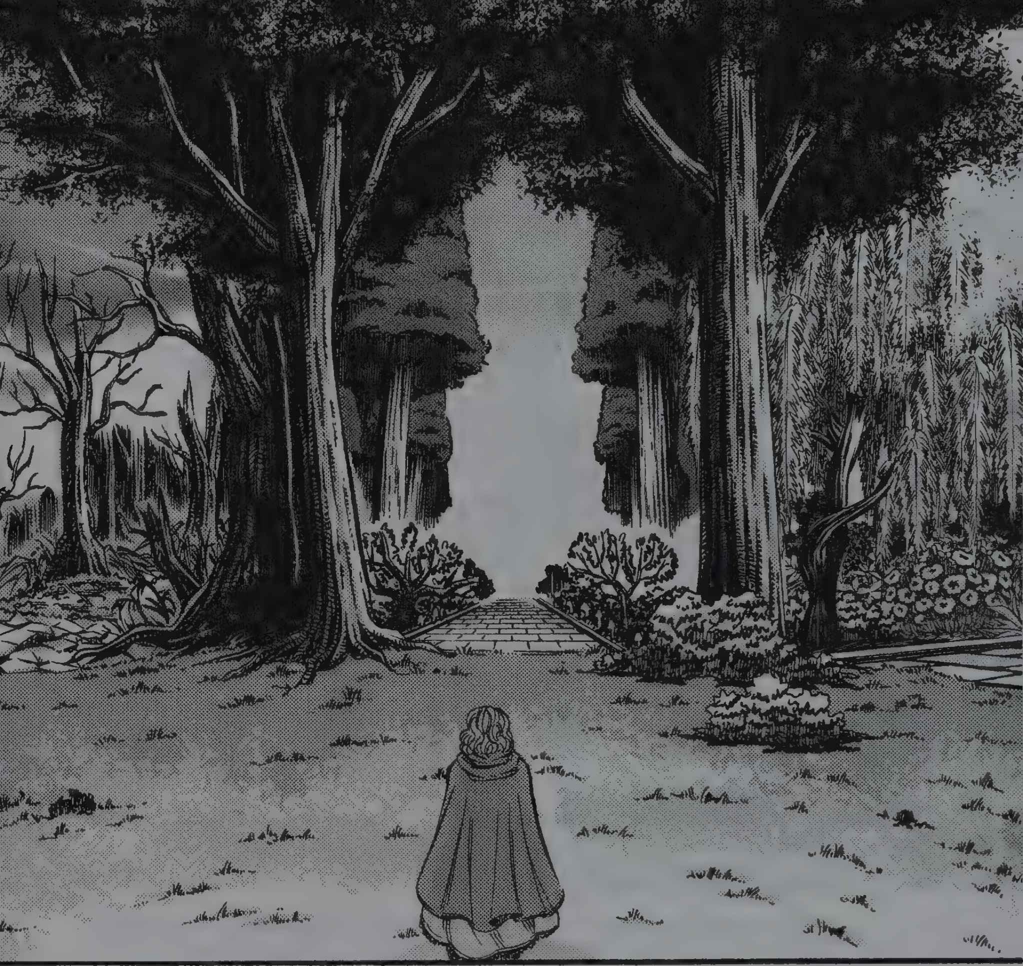
Celsia reached back into her hamper, intending to wish herself back to Quillon, but a whispered voice in her head bade her stop.

Remember, only use the basket if you have a real need!

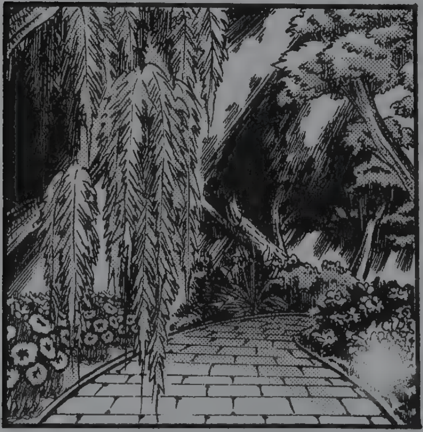
Her grandmother's words caused her to freeze. She *must* have had good reason for voicing that warning. In fact, it was reckless of her to use the basket so thoughtlessly. She barely knew a thing about its magical properties—what if it made things even *worse*? For now, it seemed safer to use her own reliable self.

Getting to her feet, Celsia took the one path there was out of the small clearing. It opened into an even larger clearing.



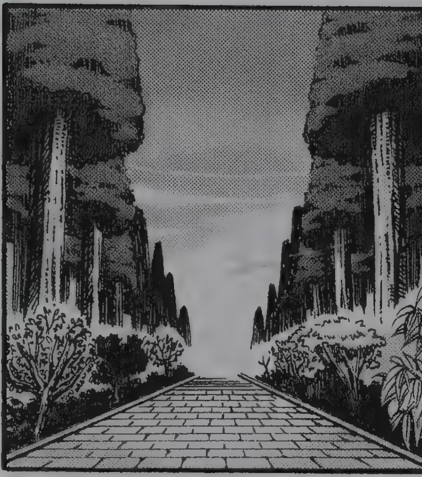


Celsia surveyed the peculiar scene before her. It was one clearing met by three separate, clearly-defined paths, each paved in its own distinctive colour. Turning to look more closely at the trees surrounding the clearing, Celsia realised that the trunks were woven together so tightly that the only place to go were these three paths.

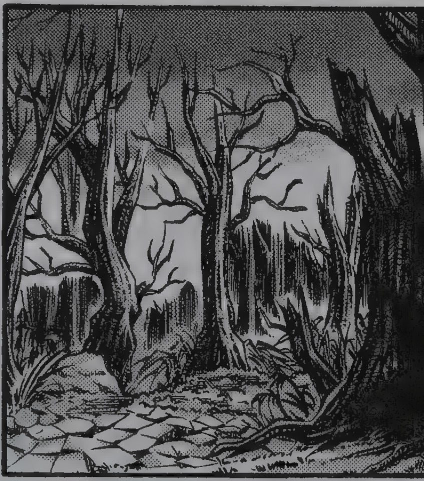


The first path had bricks of reflective yellow, flanked by roses, petunias and other decorative flowers. Butterflies flitted and bluebirds chirped, while the glow of bright sunlight gave the road a soft, golden sheen. Further along the path, Celsia could see mossy oaks, rowan and hazel trees. There, the *Golden Path* curved and vanished into the distance.

The middle path was ramrod straight and paved with white tiles, ending in a distant point on the horizon. Unlike the first, this path was eerily silent, with not a sign of life in sight. Tall pines lined both sides of the road, while mushrooms, peaches and bushes with berries grew beneath their foliage. Light seemed to dissipate when it hit the *Silver Path*, lending the air a shimmering, mysterious quality.

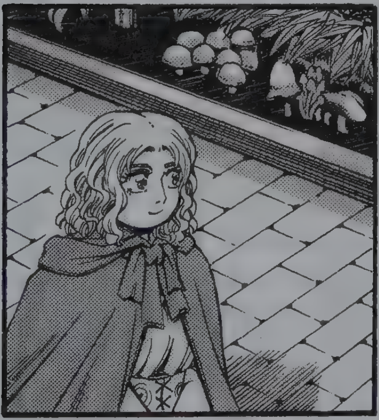


The last path was a *Copper Path*, and its bricks were crooked and broken. It had treacherous dips filled with withered weeds, threatening to trip the unwary traveller. The trees were black and stripped of leaves, and there was a slight bubbling heat emitted by the path. It seemed like it was crudely paved on a volcanic fault line.



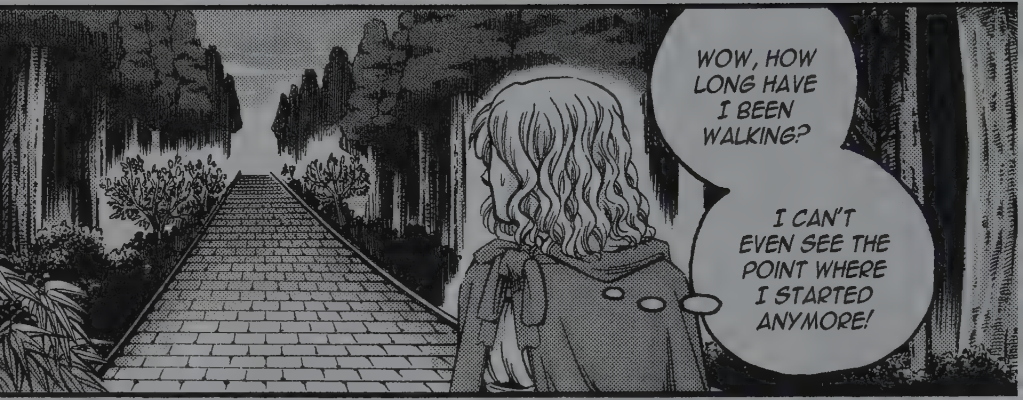
Celsia grimaced at this third path. It seemed *way* too much of an adventure, so she turned back to the other two; yellow and white.

All that glitters is not gold, she thought, eyeing the golden bricks. It was a reasonable precaution, so after some more thinking, she took a deep breath and set foot onto the Silver Path.



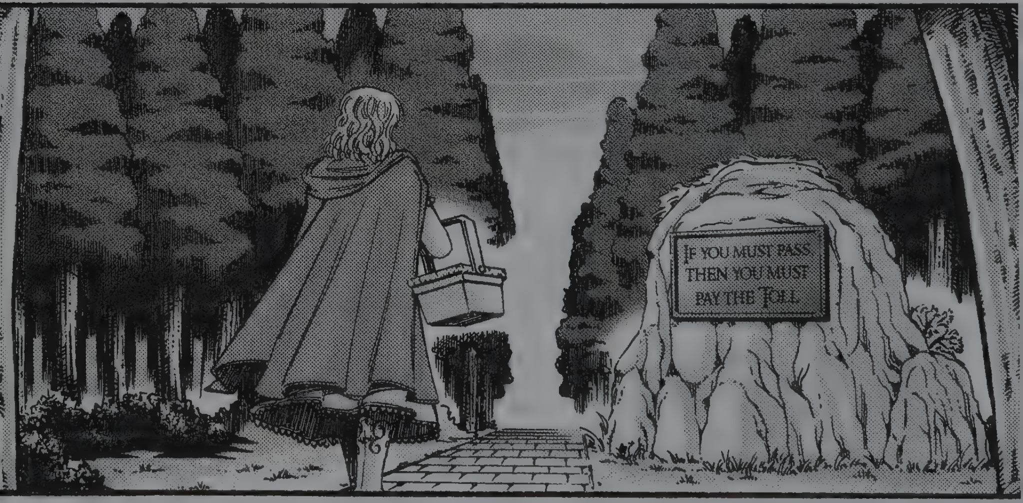
The path was smooth and easy. Though it could not have been perfectly straight, it *felt* as if it was. Not a single sound disturbed her as she walked, and eventually she was able to admire all the plum, pear and apricot trees. They grew sporadically to the side of the road, with fat mushrooms glistening in their shade.

After a long while, Celsia turned and looked behind her.


WOW, HOW LONG HAVE I BEEN WALKING?
I CAN'T EVEN SEE THE POINT WHERE I STARTED ANYMORE!

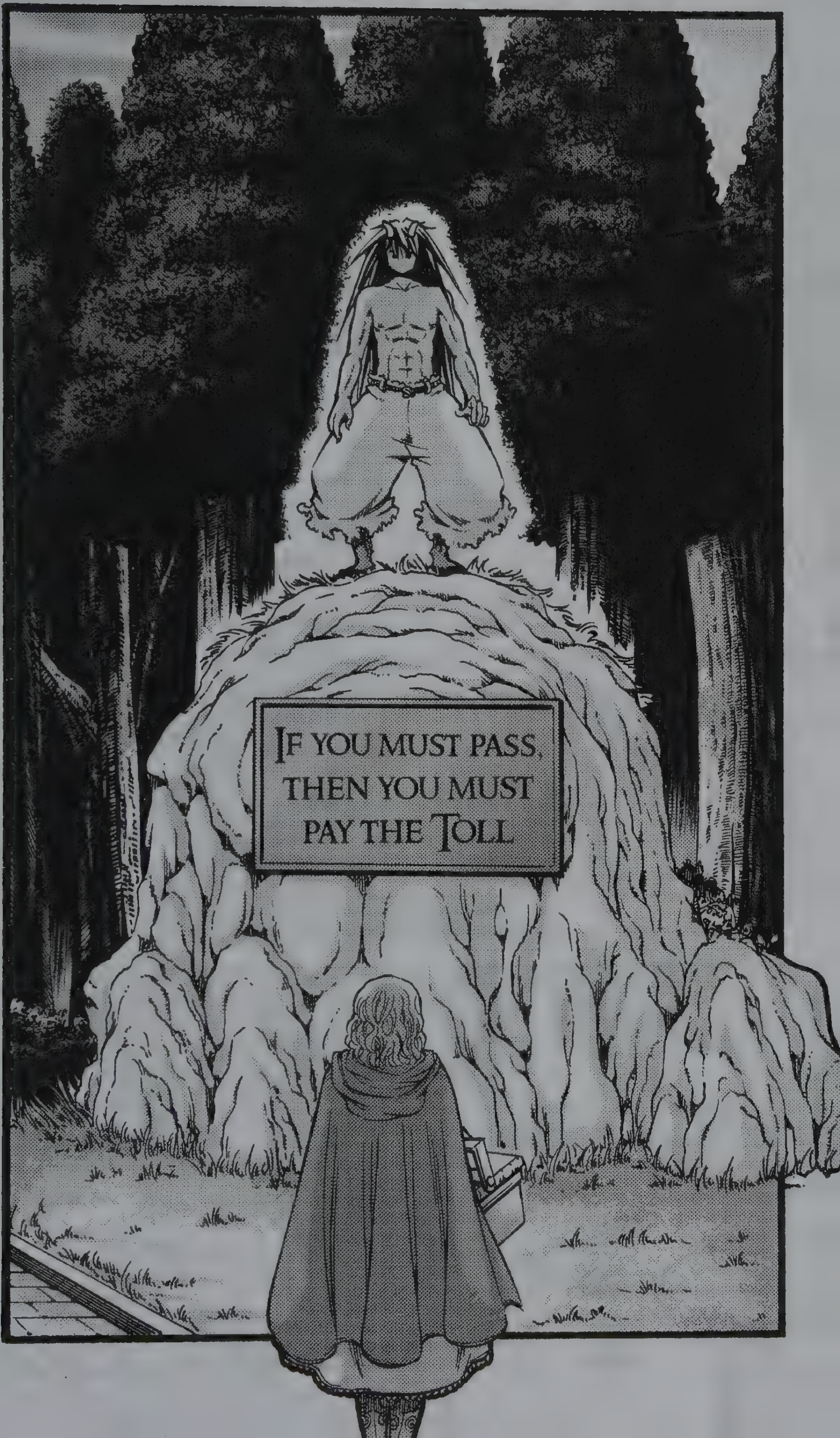
Anxiety began to gnaw at her, and she quickened her pace. How long was this road, and where did it lead? It now stretched endlessly in front and behind, and the trees on both sides were so tall and uniform, she couldn't even see if there were any identifiable landmarks behind them. At least with her basket, she had *help*...

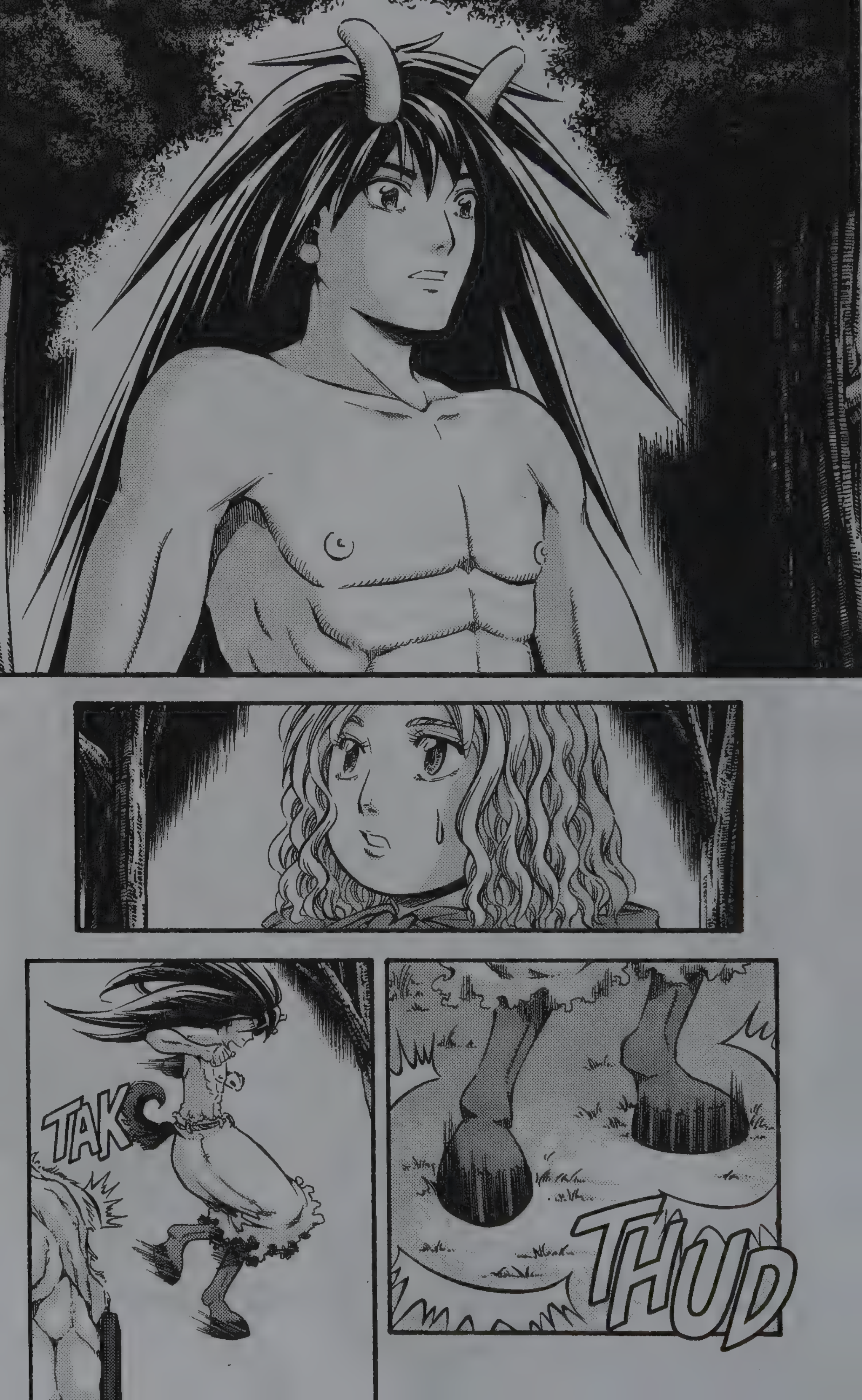
Suddenly, she spotted a glimmer of open space up ahead. Eagerly, she ran towards it, entering to find another small, circular clearing. The Silver Path continued at the other end, but what caught Celsia's attention was a large boulder that stood to the side of the new path. It bore a plaque with a bolded inscription.

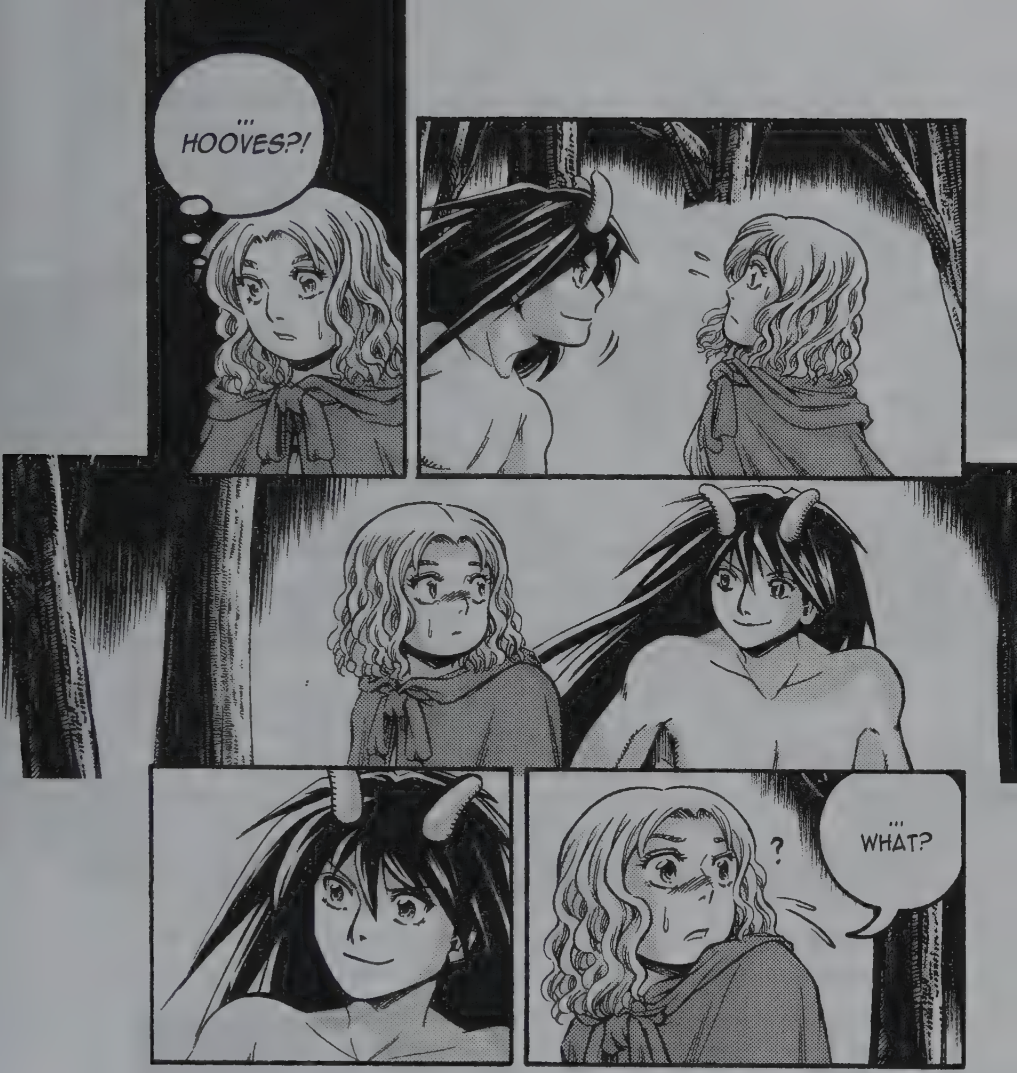

IF YOU MUST PASS THEN YOU MUST PAY THE TOLL

IF YOU MUST PASS, THEN YOU MUST PAY THE TOLL.

The plaque spelled out its demands in capital letters, but made no mention of what the price was or how to pay it. Just as Celsia was pondering its meaning, a dark figure rose from atop the boulder, peering down at her.


IF YOU MUST PASS, THEN YOU MUST PAY THE TOLL


TAK
THUD



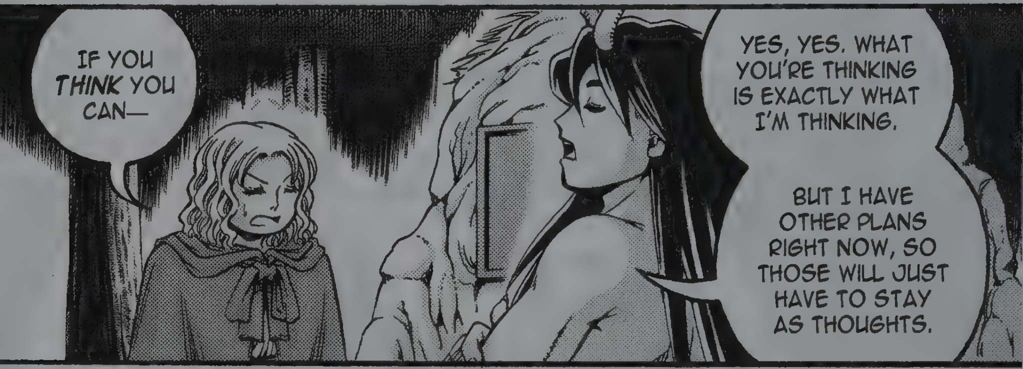
The shirtless 'boy' seemed no older than her, but he clearly wasn't human. He had a pair of goat's legs under his raggedy trousers, and what looked to be stumpy horns on his head. And his *hair*?!

He circled her, smirking. Celsia's mind, meanwhile, quickly rattled through some of the more colourful books with pictures she'd read, ones that documented all the various *other-races* living on Fableton. She could recall a race of half-men, half-goat creatures from an isle in the north, known for their drunkenness, rowdy behaviour, and kidnapping of human women they found desirable. They were called...

'You're a *faun*!' Celsia blurted out, her eyes wide.

The faun's smile grew even wider. 'Yes, and you're a human girl, all alone, with no one else for miles around.'

Celsia's heart skipped a beat. Her fingers flew to the little dagger she kept in her cloak, before belatedly remembering that she had left it embedded in Salinger's arm. Still, the faun didn't look so large and menacing close up. Except for his cocky smirk, which she suddenly felt compelled to wipe off his face.


YES, YES. WHAT YOU'RE THINKING IS EXACTLY WHAT I'M THINKING.
BUT I HAVE OTHER PLANS RIGHT NOW, SO THOSE WILL JUST HAVE TO STAY AS THOUGHTS.
IF YOU *THINK* YOU CAN—

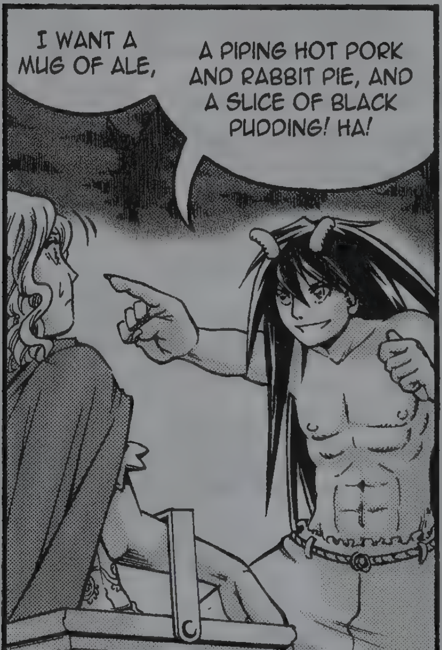
'Anyway, you may have noticed this rather enormous plaque.'

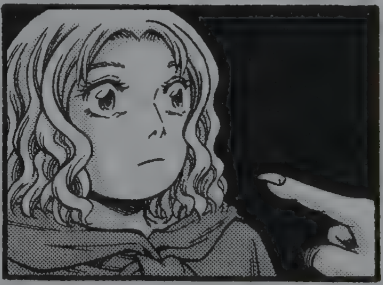
'It says I have to pay a toll. To you, I suppose,' Celsia replied.

'So you can read. Splendid! Yes, I am the *esteemed* owner of this path that you've been strolling on for the past hour or so. If you want to continue, I'll have to exact some form of payment.'

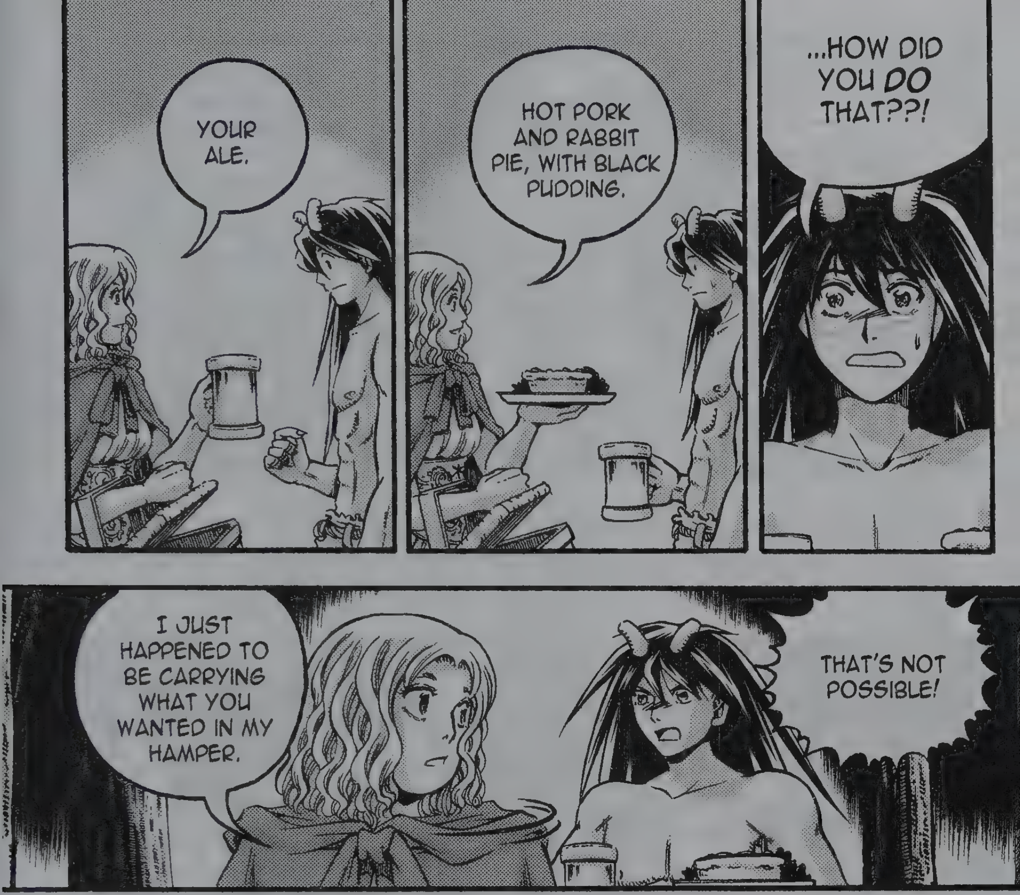
Are fauns usually this loquacious? Celsia thought, holding her hamper close. 'So, what do you want?' she asked with bated breath.

The faun hopped in glee, as if doing a victory dance. Clapping his hands together, he pointed a finger right at her nose.


I WANT A MUG OF ALE,
A PIPING HOT PORK AND RABBIT PIE, AND A SLICE OF BLACK PUDDING! HA!



Without another word, Celsia reached into her hamper. It had only been two minutes, but he'd already given her a way to wipe that smirk off his face.

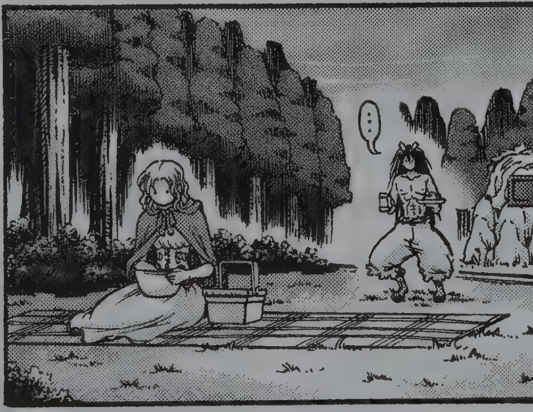

YOUR ALE.
HOT PORK AND RABBIT PIE, WITH BLACK PUDDING.
...HOW DID YOU *DO* THAT??!
I JUST HAPPENED TO BE CARRYING WHAT YOU WANTED IN MY HAMPER.
THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE!

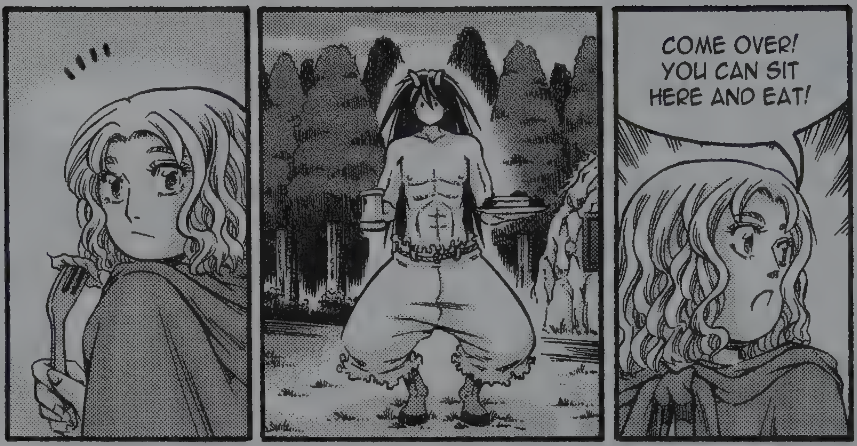
'I sniffed your scent earlier, and I was *certain* you weren't carrying any food with you!'

Celsia looked over her shoulder and frowned. 'Then why did you ask me for food, if you thought I wasn't carrying any?'

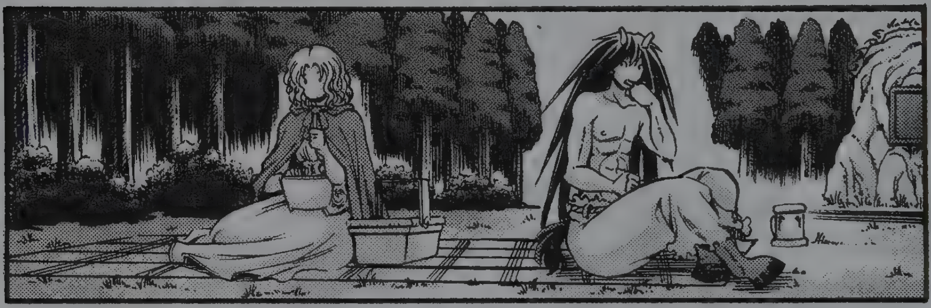
The faun didn't reply. He just stood there in sullen silence, still holding the ale and pie, watching Celsia slowly wander the clearing.

The aroma of the food recalled her earlier hunger, so when she spotted a grassy area in the shade, she reached into her hamper and produced a picnic blanket, followed by a bowl of cucumber and egg salad. Spreading the blanket, she smoothed her skirts and sat down to eat.



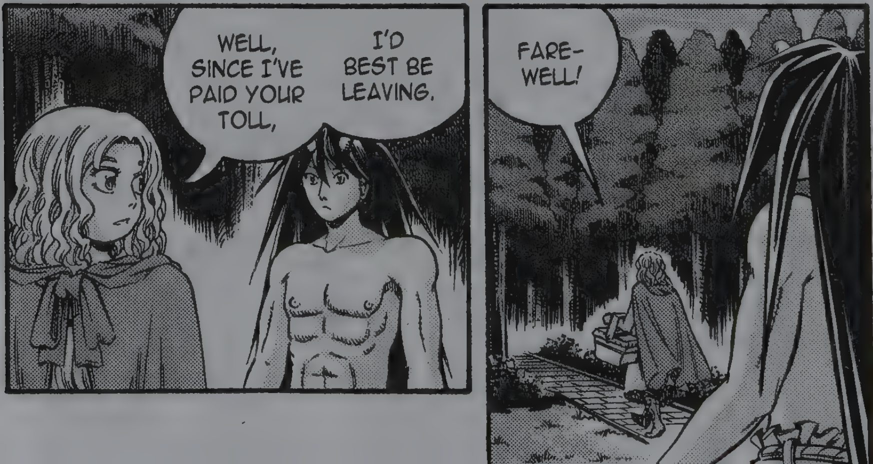

COME OVER! YOU CAN SIT HERE AND EAT!

Celsia gestured at the unoccupied end of her picnic blanket, which the faun then stared at, as if it were some kind of exotic animal. After a while, he slowly walked over and sat down on the far end.



They ate in silence, with Celsia taking quick bites of her salad. When they both finished, Celsia stood up abruptly, tugging at her blanket and causing the faun to leap to his hooves.

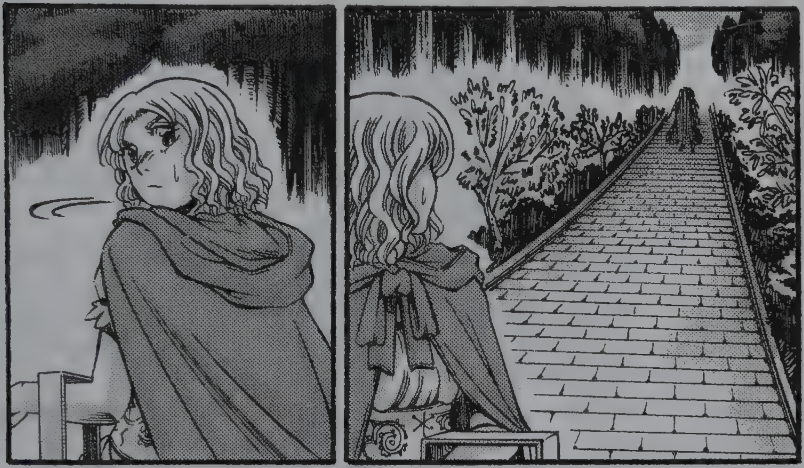
Gathering the blanket, plate, and mug, she deftly returned them to her hamper. Like the key from before, they vanished quickly and quietly.


WELL, SINCE I'VE PAID YOUR TOLL,
I'D BEST BE LEAVING.
FARE-WELL!

*****

Celsia continued on the path, silently counting the seconds as they passed. It had been half an hour since she left the clearing, and a full five minutes since she last turned around.

It was time again. She steeled herself and took a deep breath.

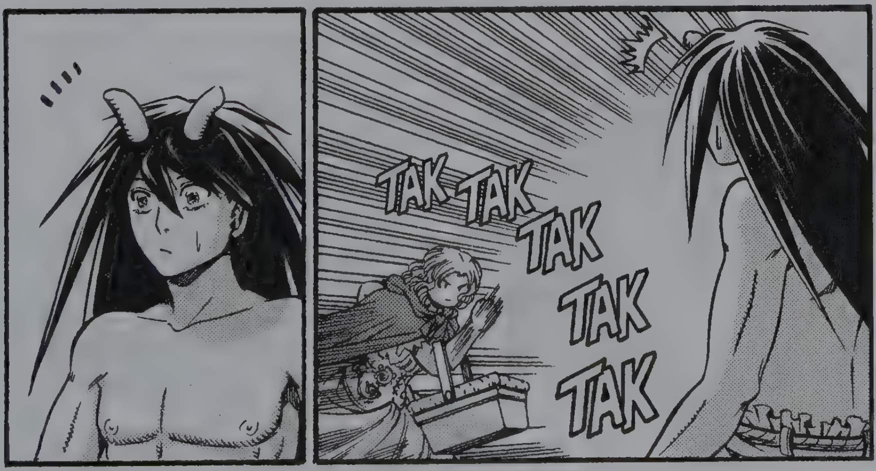


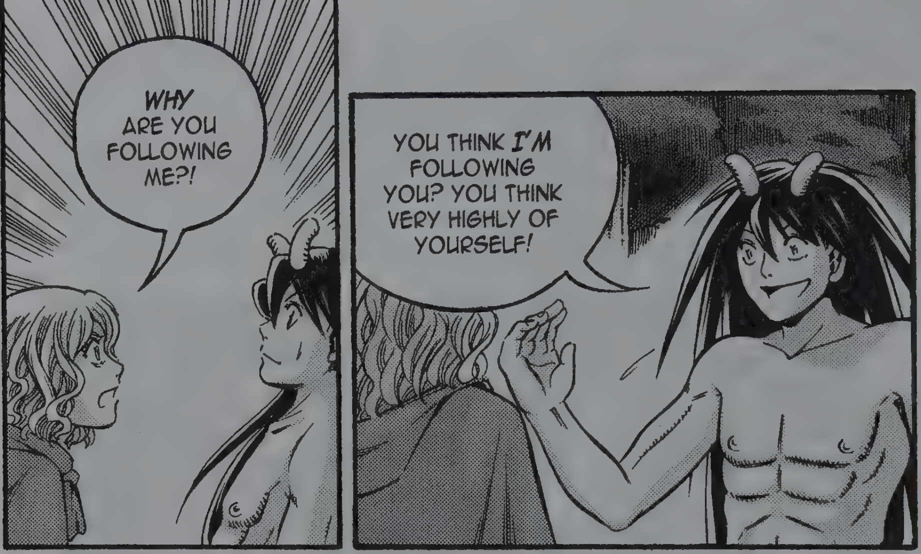
He was still there.

The faun had been following her at the same distance, all the way from the clearing. Every time she stopped and turned, he would also stop, watching her but not coming any closer. This was the *fifth* time. What did he want? She'd already paid his toll!

No. This cannot continue, she thought.

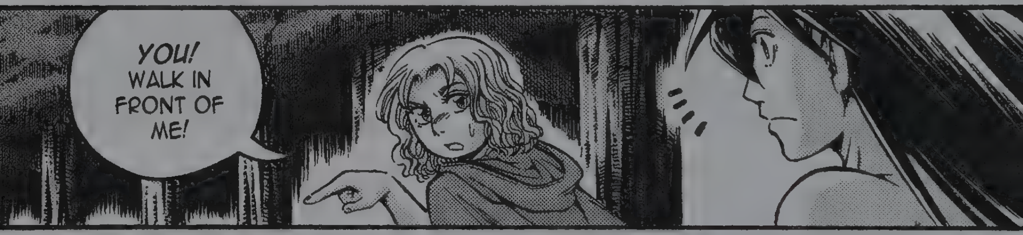
Celsia took two more steps, her feet dull and heavy. Then, without any warning, she turned and sprinted the fifty or so yards between her and the faun.




WHY ARE YOU FOLLOWING ME?!
YOU THINK I'M FOLLOWING YOU? YOU THINK VERY HIGHLY OF YOURSELF!

The faun swept his hands in a dramatic arc, gesturing at the path they were on. ‘One road, two travellers. What proof do you have, that I’m following you? I’m just going in the same direction.’

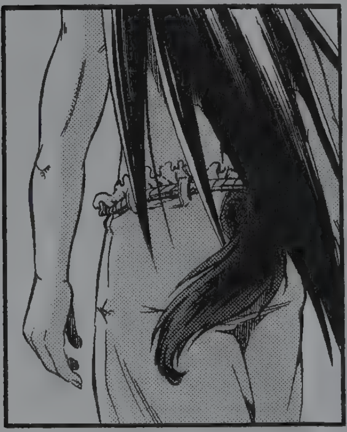
Celsia bit her lip, and stiffly turned back around. She started walking again, this time hearing the solid *clop clop* of the faun’s hooves just a few feet behind her. It was going to drive her crazy.

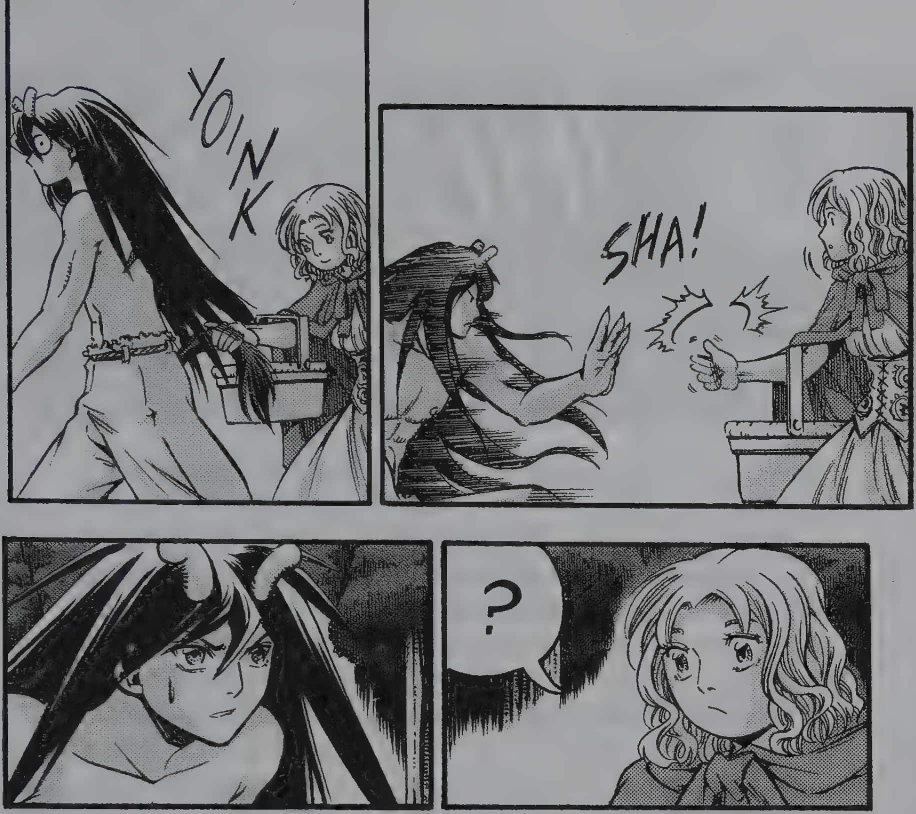

YOU! WALK IN FRONT OF ME!

The faun shrugged, and then complied. Celsia waited until he was a few yards in front of her before she started walking, her eyes boring suspiciously into his back. After a few more minutes, she realised something that had previously escaped her notice.

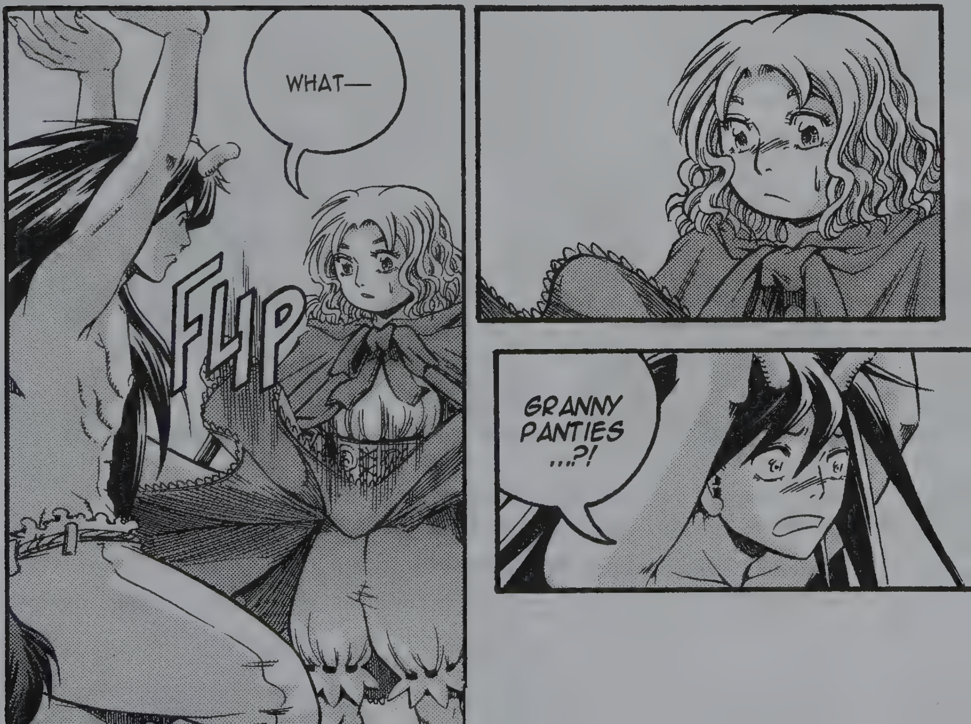
He had a *tail.*

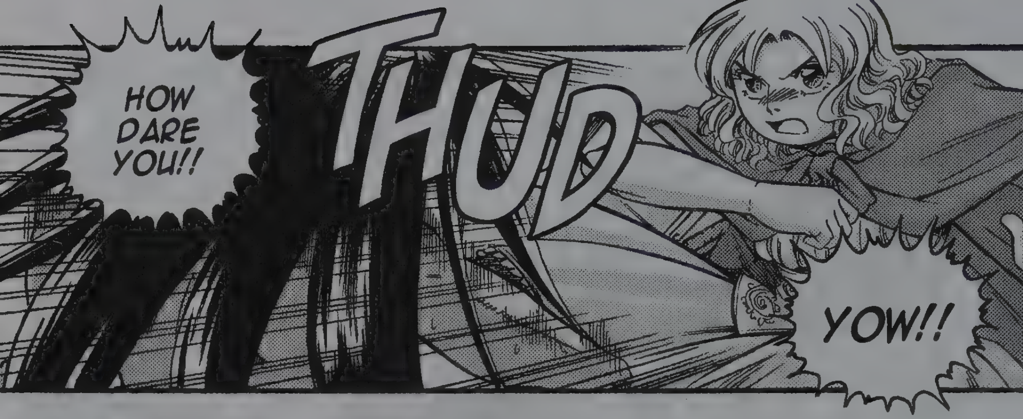
She watched it swing lazily back and forth, its movements hypnotic. It looked soft and fluffy, like the tail of Jax the dog, which she always liked to brush her hand against. If she could touch it, and feel its texture on her—





The unsettled look on his face was strange. Celsia started to speak, but the faun just stormed silently up to her.


WHAT—
FLIP
GRANNY PANTIES ...?!


HOW DARE YOU!!
THUD
YOW!!

'You... you *kicked* me!' the faun gasped, doubling over in pain. 'I didn't even *touch* you!!'

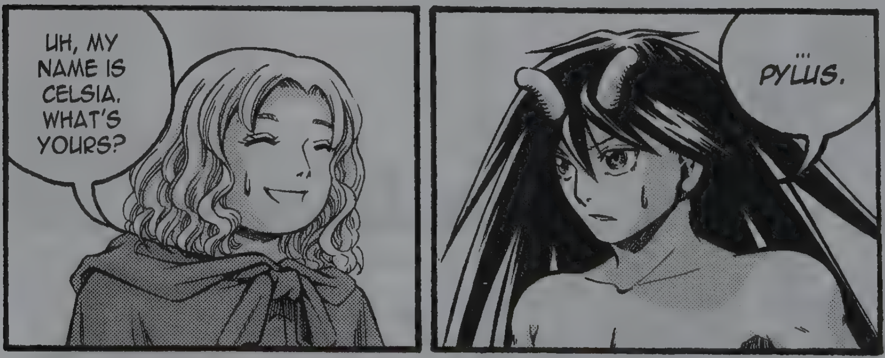
'Oh, I'm sorry,' Celsia retorted airily, one hand on her hip. 'I have a knee-jerk reaction to having my skirt flipped. It's a medical condition, where I have to *knee all the jerks*.'

'Given what's under your skirts, you can keep your killer knees to yourself,' the faun muttered, recovering just enough to straighten up. 'First my tail gets yanked. Then, my eyes get blighted by ugly undergarments. Pain upon *pain*.'

Celsia felt a twinge of guilt. 'I... I didn't mean to pull your tail. I didn't know you would find it so painful.'

The faun gave a melancholy sigh. He was clearly going to milk this for all it was worth. 'I suppose I can forgive you for the tail. After all, human girls suffer from Tail Envy. But the granny panties? Not so much.'

Is he going to keep calling me 'granny panties?'

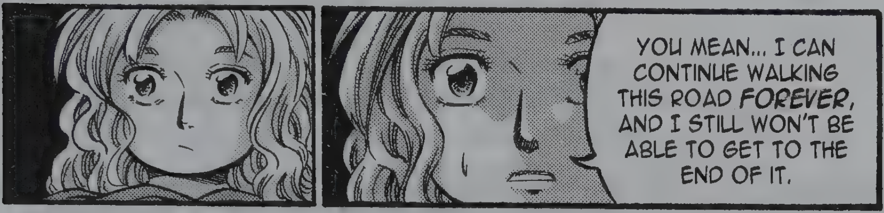

UH, MY NAME IS CELSIA. WHAT'S YOURS?
... PYLUS.

'So, Pylus,' Celsia said, grateful that they now seemed to be on conversational terms. 'Can you tell me where this road leads?'

'I don't know. This road just goes on and on like this.'

'...*What?*'

'This road just continues like this. It goes nowhere!' Pylus waved one arm in a hapless fashion, the tone of his voice rising. 'It's an *enchanted* road. I'd like to know where it leads too!'


YOU MEAN... I CAN CONTINUE WALKING THIS ROAD *FOREVER*, AND I STILL WON'T BE ABLE TO GET TO THE END OF IT.

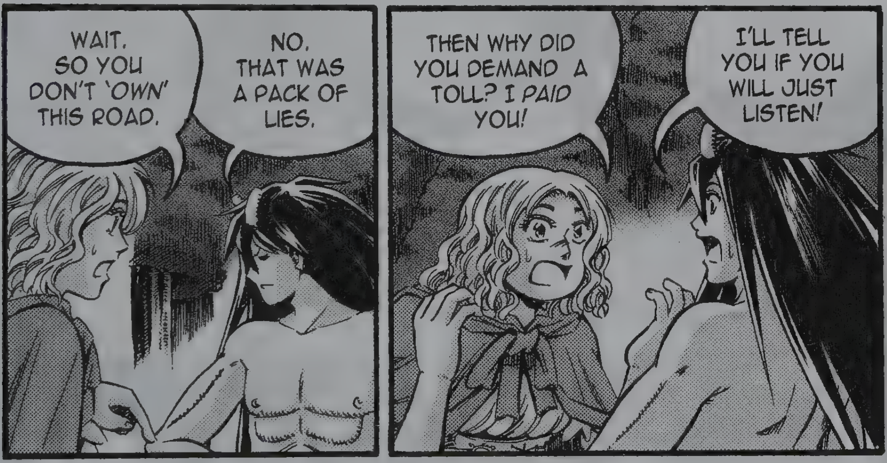
Pylus nodded, head hanging. 'This road *has* no end, it seems.'

'...How do you get off it?'

'You *can't*! If I knew, I wouldn't be *trapped* here!' Pylus' voice grated with fatalism. 'I've been walking back and forth on this road for months! It's an endless loop that leads back to the clearing where we met!'

'*Months*?! How long have you *been* here?'

'Six months.' Pylus sighed, shrugging his shoulders and giving her a helpless look.


WAIT. SO YOU DON'T 'OWN' THIS ROAD.
NO. THAT WAS A PACK OF LIES.
THEN WHY DID YOU DEMAND A TOLL? I PAID YOU!
I'LL TELL YOU IF YOU WILL JUST LISTEN!

'Six months ago, I stumbled onto this road, and chose the Silver Path. Same as you did, am I correct?' Pylus said slowly, to which Celsia nodded impatiently.

'At the place with the plaque, I encountered a man clothed in nothing but rags, who seemed both agitated and eager to see me. I thought him suspicious, but all he asked for was payment for walking 'his' path, so I agreed. But then he asked for a spear and a helmet, which I clearly wasn't carrying.'

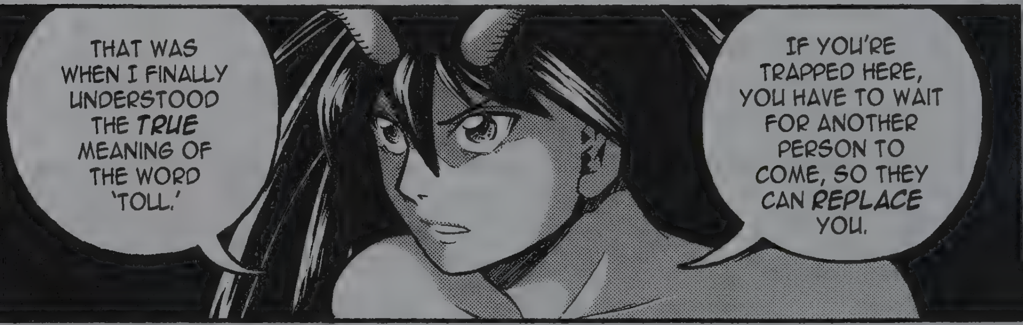
Pylus continued. 'I told him I didn't have such things. However, without answering me, he rushed off down the path I came, leaving me all alone in the clearing. So I just continued to walk the Silver Path, this road we're on, until I realised it appeared to be an infinite loop.'

Celsia's breath caught in her throat, and she glanced around. She saw the fruit hanging from the trees, and the plump, edible mushrooms that sprouted almost everywhere.

'All those fruit and mushrooms kept you alive,' she murmured. Suddenly, they seemed more sinister than juicy.

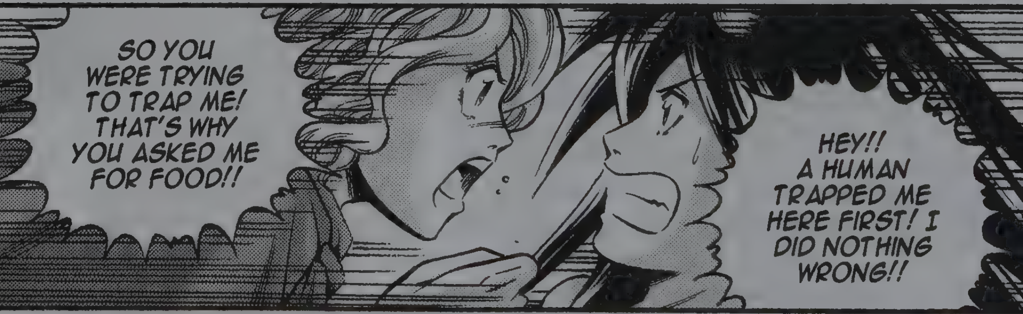
'Yes. Eventually I decided to stop walking, so I turned around and retraced my steps. And guess what? I reached the clearing with the plaque in only a few hours, though I'd been walking for days. The path I originally came from? That had vanished; I was *trapped.*'

Celsia shivered. It was clear he was telling the truth.


IF YOU'RE TRAPPED HERE, YOU HAVE TO WAIT FOR ANOTHER PERSON TO COME, SO THEY CAN REPLACE YOU.
THAT WAS WHEN I FINALLY UNDERSTOOD THE TRUE MEANING OF THE WORD 'TOLL.'

'If you ask this new person for something they don't have, then you can escape from here. That's what the man in rags did to me.'

'So you...' Celsia whispered in a low voice. Her mind replayed their earlier exchange in the clearing.


HEY!! A HUMAN TRAPPED ME HERE FIRST! I DID NOTHING WRONG!!
SO YOU WERE TRYING TO TRAP ME! THAT'S WHY YOU ASKED ME FOR FOOD!!

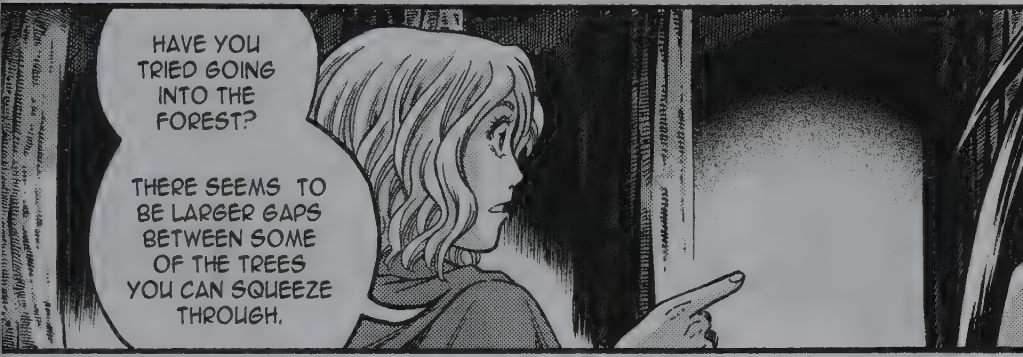
'Well, I'm *not* staying here!' Celsia snapped, gripping the handle of her hamper. 'I have a place I need to get to! I'm leaving!'

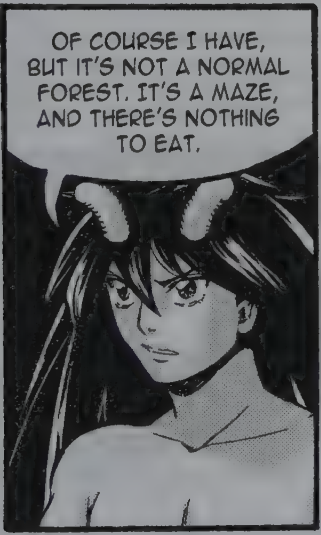
'Excuse me, but *how*?' Pylus asked in exasperation.

'I paid you the toll, didn't I?' Celsia said, blinking. 'Did that not break the spell, or whatever enchantment is on this road?'

Pylus' voice wavered with uncertainty. 'I... don't know. I don't feel any different. I followed you because I thought *you* knew the answer, but it so happens you're as without a clue as I am.'

Celsia gave a thoughtful hum. She scanned the two rows of tightly-knit pine trees looming over them.


HAVE YOU TRIED GOING INTO THE FOREST?
THERE SEEMS TO BE LARGER GAPS BETWEEN SOME OF THE TREES YOU CAN SQUEEZE THROUGH.


OF COURSE I HAVE, BUT IT'S NOT A NORMAL FOREST. IT'S A MAZE, AND THERE'S NOTHING TO EAT.

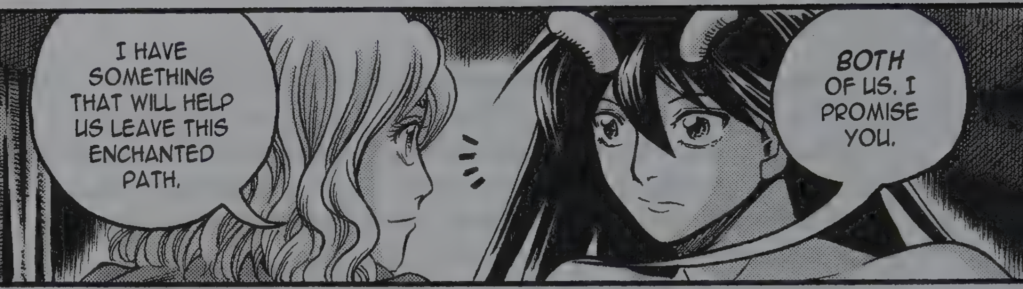
'More than once, I've tried escaping into the surrounding woods. I packed as much fruit and mushrooms as I could carry, but each time I had to turn back. There are no birds, animals or even plants in there. In fact, the foliage is so dense and the air so foggy, you can barely tell night from day. Then there are those—' At this point, Pylus shivered. '—*things*. Fast-moving shadows that find and follow you. So, I felt it safer to stay on this path.'

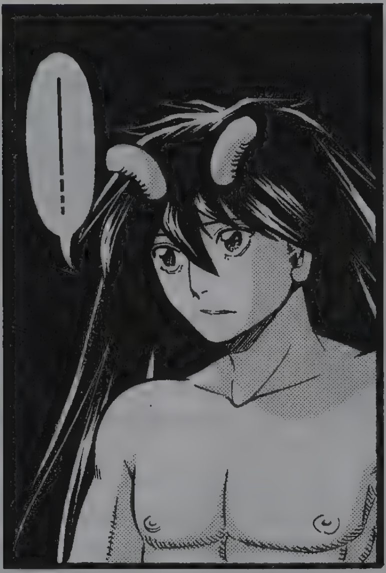
'*Shadows*?' Celsia said, raising one eyebrow. 'Are you *afraid*?'

'Of course not!' the faun replied, a bit too hastily. Then he turned away, eyes pained beneath his spiky bangs. 'It's just a fool's errand,' he eventually muttered, his voice thick with dejection.

Hearing the sadness in his voice, Celsia's heart stirred. He must have been so *lonely* here, trapped in his solitary vigil. With no one to talk to and nothing to do, he must have watched the stars and skies turn above him, filled with hopelessness and despair.

'Don't worry,' she said softly.

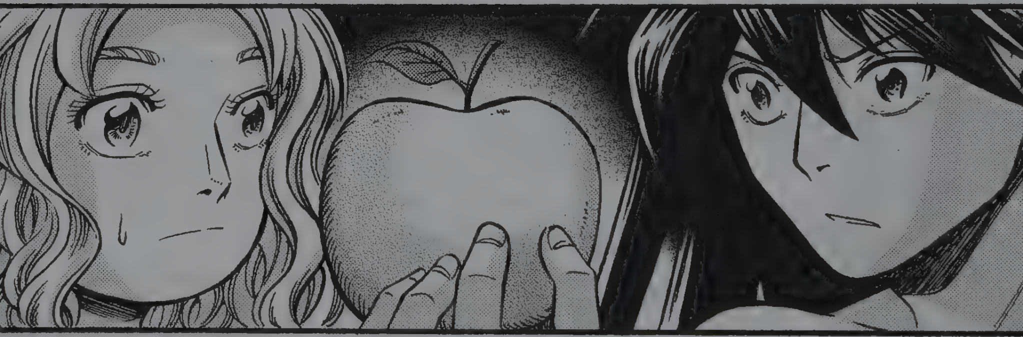

I HAVE SOMETHING THAT WILL HELP US LEAVE THIS ENCHANTED PATH.
BOTH OF US. I PROMISE YOU.

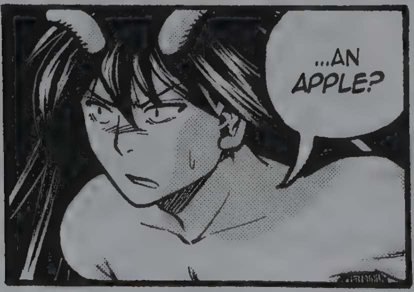


He stared back at her with eyes wide, his expression lost and vulnerable. He had green eyes with long lashes, and the sudden child-like hopefulness in his face made him look quite adorable.

Today is his lucky day, Celsia thought. *Celsia and her Magical Hamper will be his fairy godmother, saving him from this desolate place.*

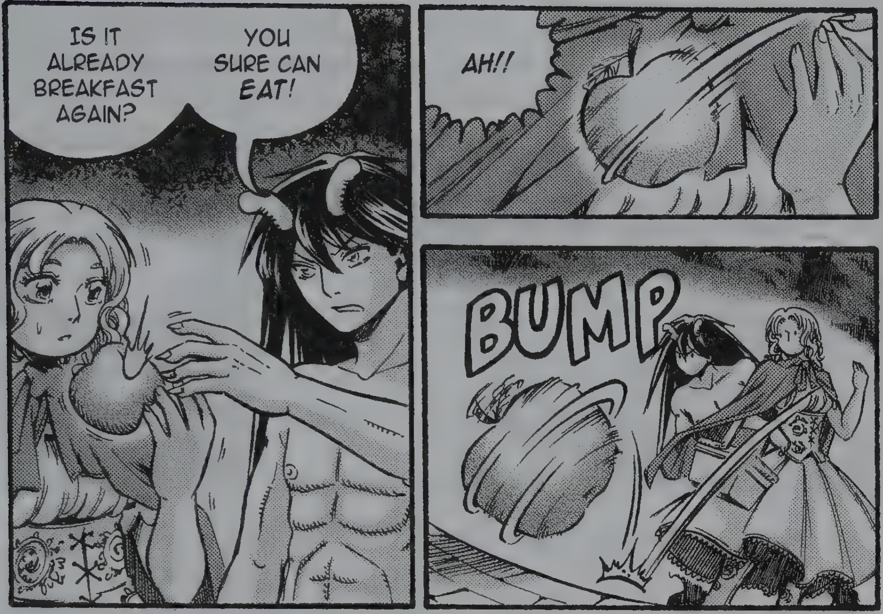
Celsia reached slowly into her hamper, and gave it her command in an authoritative voice. '*Give me something that will lead us safely off this road.*'





At least it wasn't an *exploding* apple. Celsia studied the perfectly round, smooth texture of its yellow skin. She was certain that there was more to it than meets the eye.

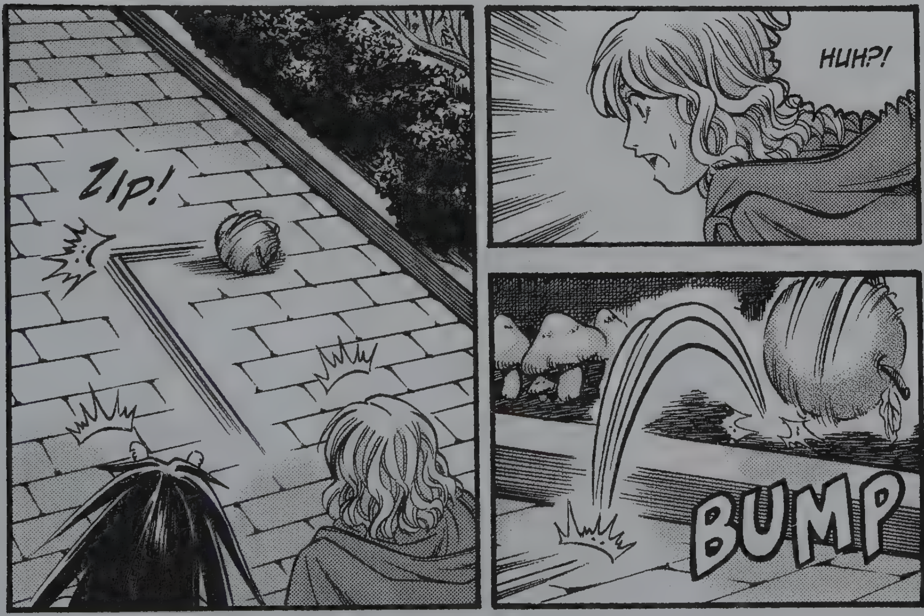
Pylus' deadpan voice suggested he thought otherwise.


IS IT ALREADY BREAKFAST AGAIN?
YOU SURE CAN EAT!
AH!!
BUMP

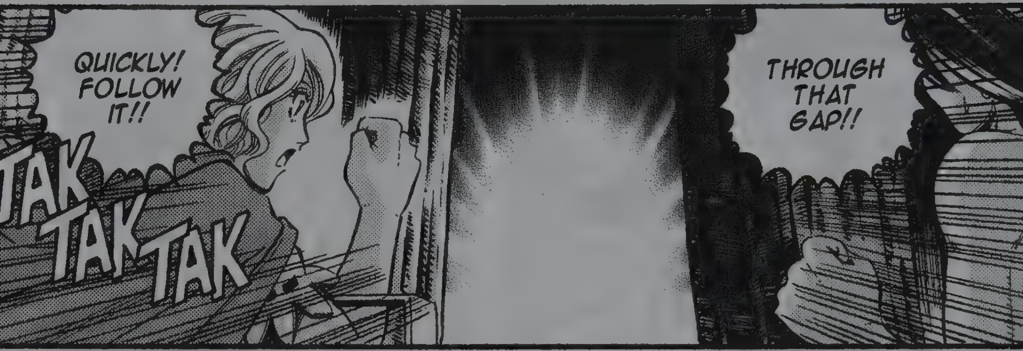
'*Py*-lus!' she snapped at him, hurrying after the apple.

'*Wha*-at?' he replied, mimicking her sing-song scolding tone.

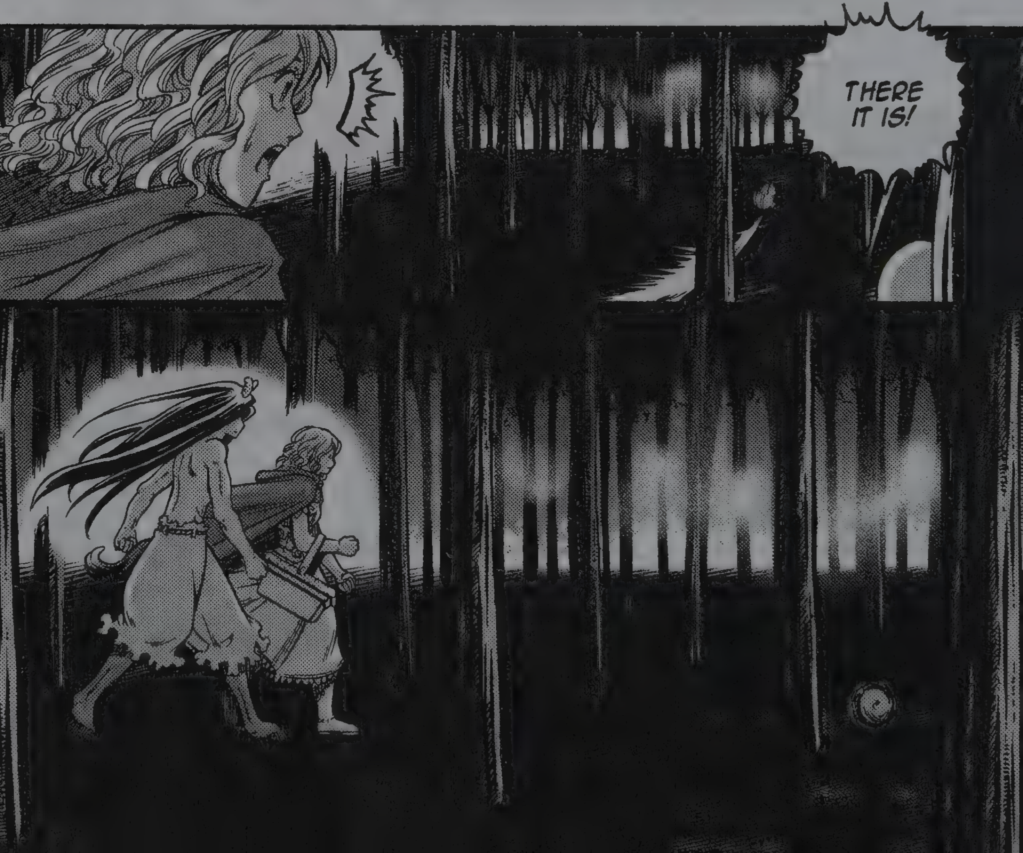
To her surprise, the apple continued to roll away at the same pace. It showed no signs of slowing, despite the flatness of the road. Celsia and Pylus followed the apple, which remained just out of reach, when it suddenly did something unexpected.

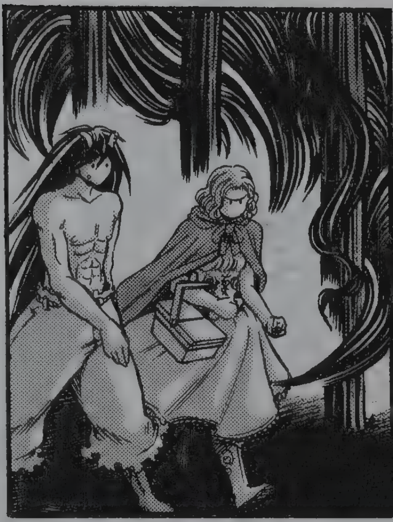

ZIP!
HUH?!
BUMP

Celsia gasped, and Pylus' jaw dropped. The apple had *hopped over* the raised curb of its own accord. Without slowing its pace, it slipped through a gap between two pine trees.


QUICKLY! FOLLOW IT!!
TAK TAK TAK
THROUGH THAT GAP!!

Celsia flung herself through the gap, with Pylus close on her heels. Looking ahead, she spied a misty forest, intermittently dotted with tall, thin pine tree trunks bare of any vegetation. It had nothing else but a plain dirt floor. The sky was covered, but it was not quite dark; random tufts of fog would form, snaking in and out of the tree trunks before slowly dissipating.





They trailed the apple, which continued rolling at the same leisurely pace. It was a brisk walk, but Celsia felt confident that if she sprinted, she could overtake the apple and snatch it from the ground. Pylus seemed less certain; the apple would occasionally take a sharp turn in a different direction, and he'd also noticed that the terrain had started to change. It was becoming more rugged and uneven.

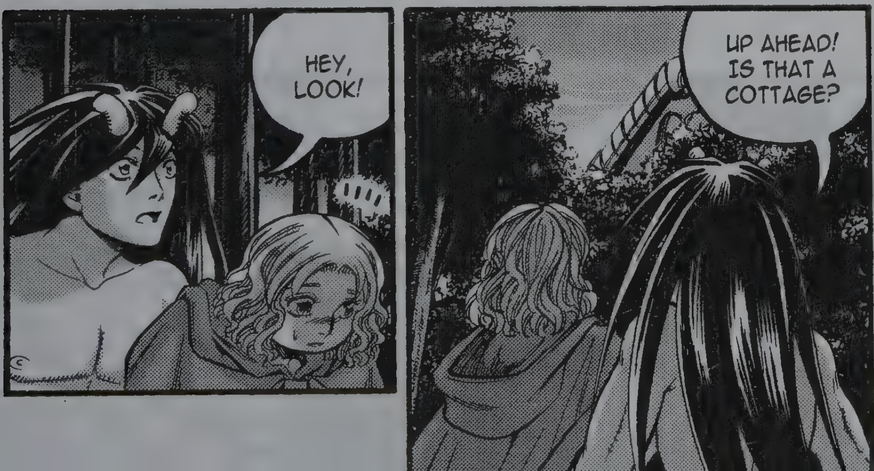
'Celsia.' Pylus whispered at her side, his voice tense.

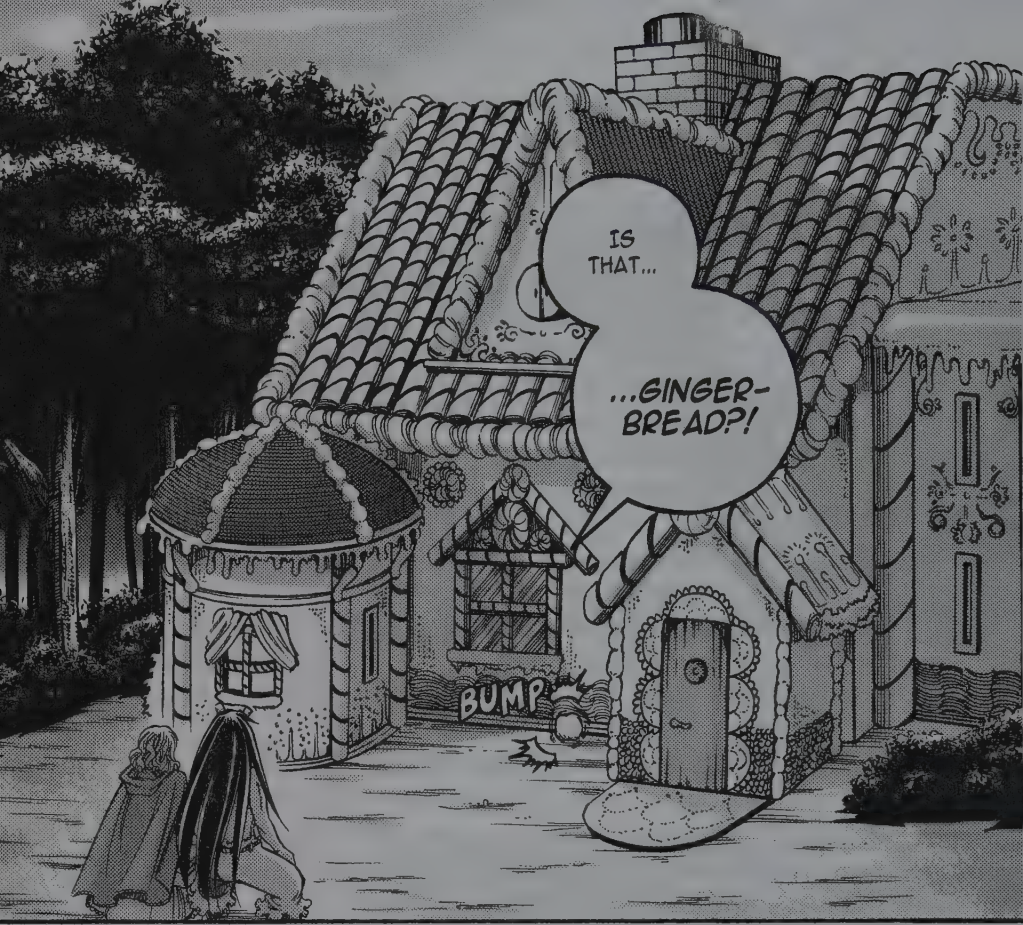
Celsia didn't reply. She already knew what he was referring to. Her eyes had never once strayed from the apple, but dark shadows were beginning to flit around the outskirts of her vision—floating wraiths with indistinguishable shapes. They reached out from just beyond her elbows, threatening to ensnare her from behind.

'Ignore them. Keep your eyes on the apple.' Celsia said tersely, her concentration intense. A drop of sweat ran down her brow. They had been walking at that brisk pace for a long time, and while the shadows kept their distance, she was starting to tire. She began to huff and puff, and alarmingly, she found her pace slowing.

Just as she was about to panic, she felt a strong arm seize hers, continuing to march her forward as if in military lock step. It was Pylus, his eyes as fervent as hers had been earlier. He was determined to get them out of there, and Celsia mouthed a silent *thank you* to him.

Eventually, the shadows receded, and bits and patches of greenery emerged. It was a welcome sight from the previous woody wasteland.

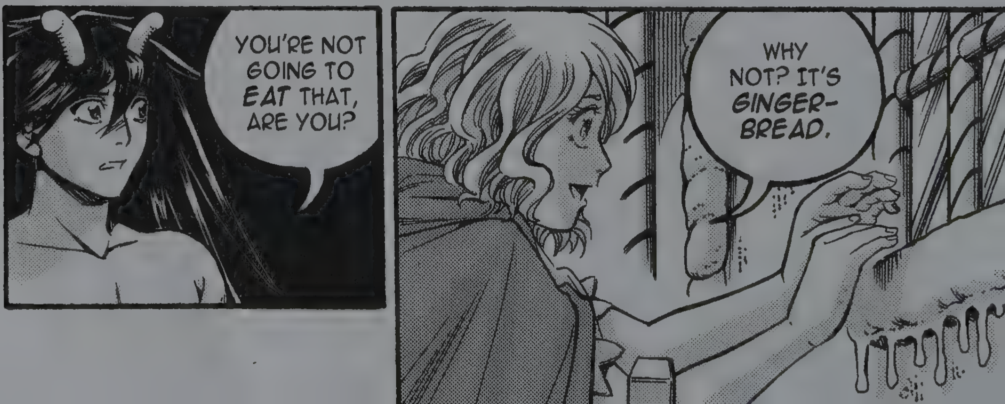

HEY, LOOK!
!!!!
UP AHEAD! IS THAT A COTTAGE?


IS THAT...
...GINGER-BREAD?!
BUMP

The apple hit the side of the gingerbread house and stopped, while the two of them marvelled at this architectural piece of giant confectionary. It appeared freshly-baked and smelled delicious, instantly filling Celsia's mind with flashes of warm, *tasty* bread. It was causing her mouth to water, and her eyes to become vacant.

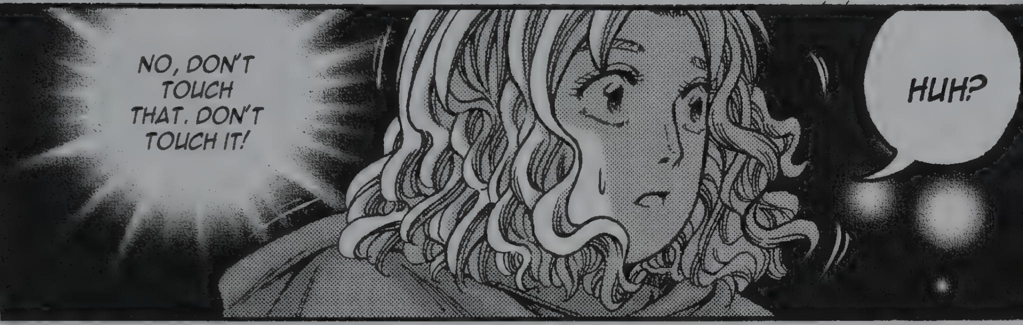
'Gingerbread,' she murmured, arms outstretched. She lurched towards the lovely, *delicious* house. 'That window ledge—'

'Wait,' said Pylus.


YOU'RE NOT GOING TO EAT THAT, ARE YOU?
WHY NOT? IT'S GINGER-BREAD.

'That's disgusting!' Pylus cried, indignant. 'Do you eat candy off the floor too? We don't know what or *why* this house is here! At least eat it from the inside out, it ought to be cleaner that way—'

Pylus' rants faded into the background, overpowered by the enticing smell of the gingerbread. Celsia's face was now mere inches from the window ledge, which was caked with surgary icing. She could already feel it on her tongue...


HUH?
NO, DON'T TOUCH THAT. DON'T TOUCH IT!

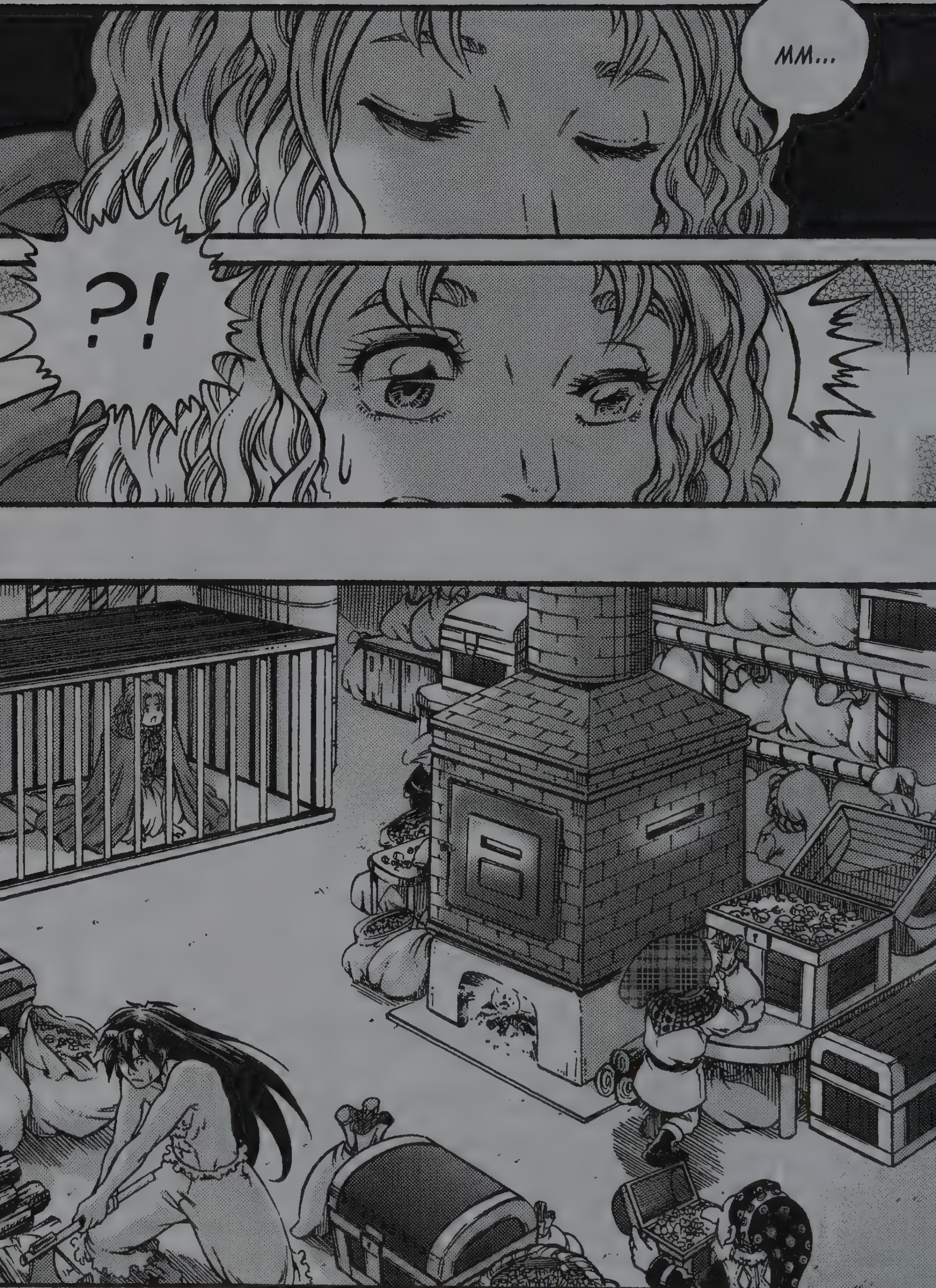
She stopped abruptly, glancing at the trees around her. What were those voices just then? They appear to have come from the swishing of the tree leaves, the wind seemingly caressing them into a tuneless, soundless song...

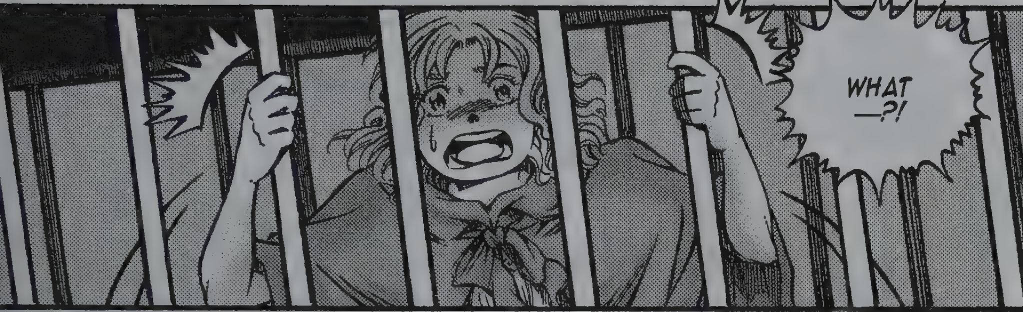
However, that was just a momentary distraction. The next thing she knew, she had bitten a mouthful from the window ledge. It was sweet, so sweet—*too* sweet. She felt a gag reflex hit the back of her throat, and saw her vision spin and the floor coming fast—*too* fast. Then there was a sudden *thud* and a shout from Pylus, followed by the world turning black...

A door opened, and then closed. Footsteps shuffled close to her face. Then her hearing faded, and all was truly black.

4: THE ORANGE WITCH

BY QUEENIE CHAN


MM...
?!

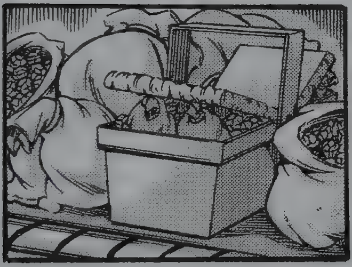


Celsia shook the bars of the cage, but the metal rods held fast. The events from earlier came rushing back—the Gingerbread house, the window sill…

Why make a house out of gingerbread, if you intend to punish wayward travellers for tasting a mouthful? she thought in dismay.

Settling back onto her little pallet, Celsia gradually became aware of the other inhabitants of the room. At first, she only noticed Pylus, listlessly chopping wood to her right, but soon, little bobbing movements next to the benches caught her eye. She noticed that there was not one, not two, but *seven* little men shuffling about. The men were so short, their caps only came up to her waist. *Dwarves*!

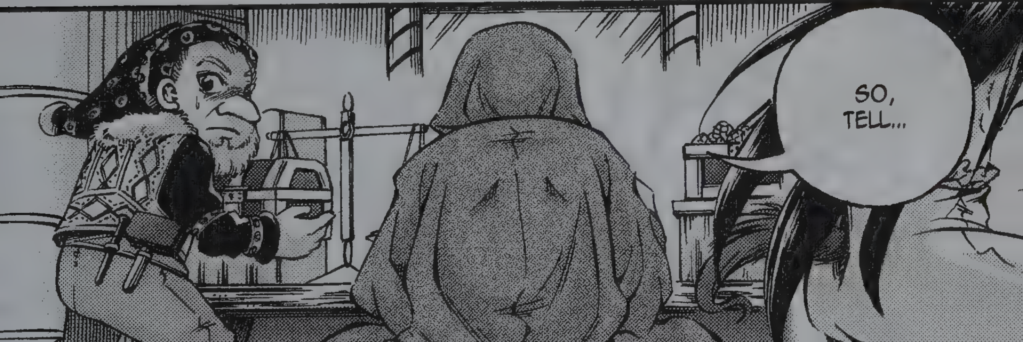
…And also, what looked to be an **enormous** pile of treasure.

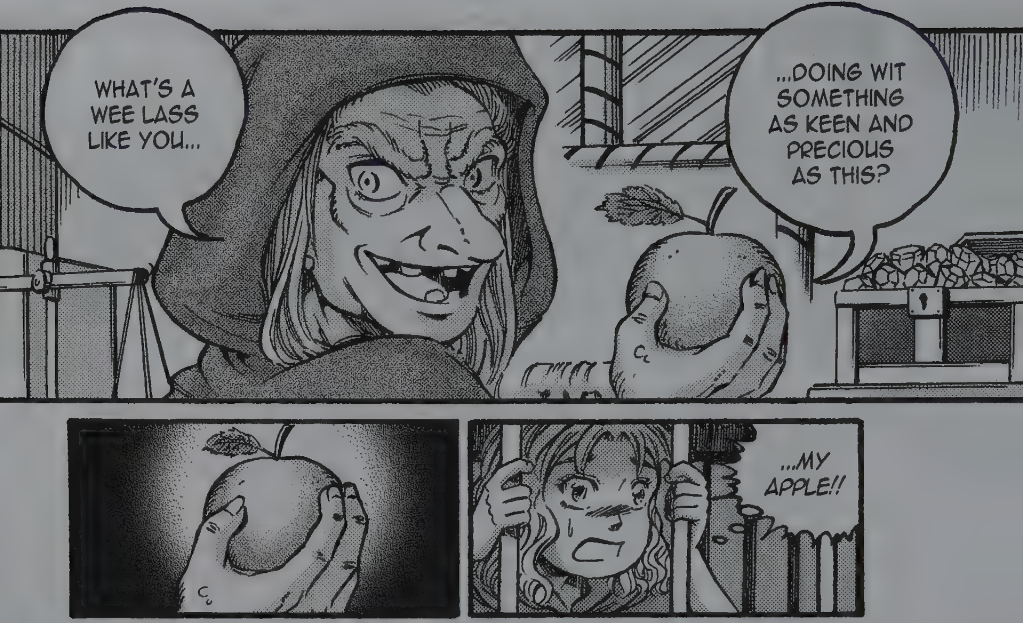


Perhaps she should have noticed that first. The room brimmed with glittering jewels and precious metals, much of it bulging from within coarse canvas bags, piled haphazardly atop shelves and tables. Celsia spotted her basket in a corner, used as a box for one such bag of riches. Luckily, her captors doesn't seem to realise that her basket may be worth more than all the wealth in the room.

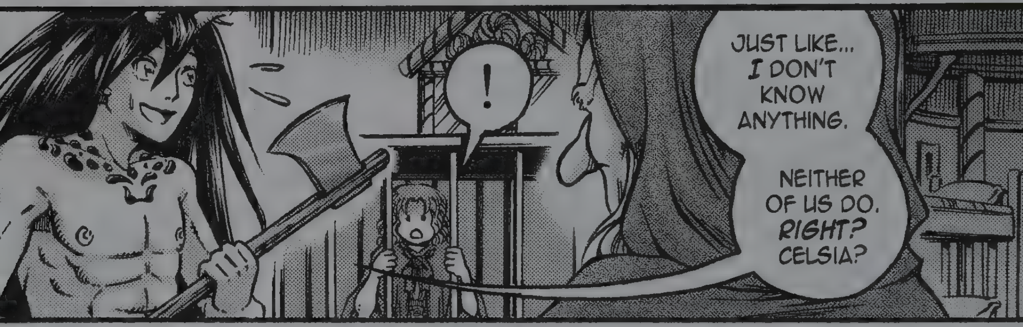
'Done with yer gormy little nap, my sweet?'

The accent was thick, and throaty. It drifted from the other side of the room, where a lone figure sat. The figure was shrouded in a rough, moth-eaten orange cloak that blended in with the surroundings.




WHAT'S A WEE LASS LIKE YOU...
...DOING WIT SOMETHING AS KEEN AND PRECIOUS AS THIS?
...MY APPLE!!

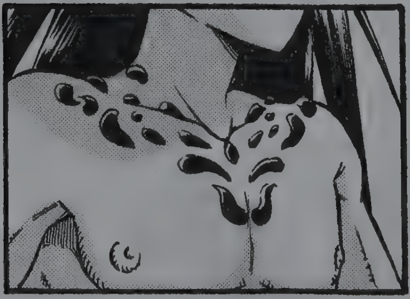
'That's mine! Please give it back to me! And also my—'
'I've said it before. It's hers, but she doesn't know anything.'

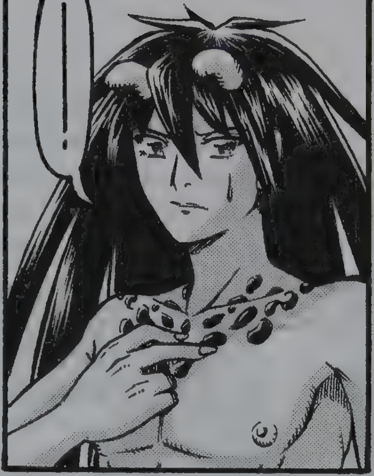

JUST LIKE... I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING.
NEITHER OF US DO. RIGHT? CELSIA?
!

Pylus' voice quavered with faux-cheerfulness, but it evaporated when the old woman gave him a sharp look. Celsia gaped at him.

He had been chopping wood with an axe, but now he just stood there, meekly holding the implement in front of the old woman. The sight of Celsia in a cage clearly hadn't moved him to be her hero.

Pylus turned and locked eyes with her. His gaze revealed the same level of despondency he had earlier on the enchanted path. Celsia's eyes then drifted lower, twigged by the realisation that there was something around his neck. Something *odd*.

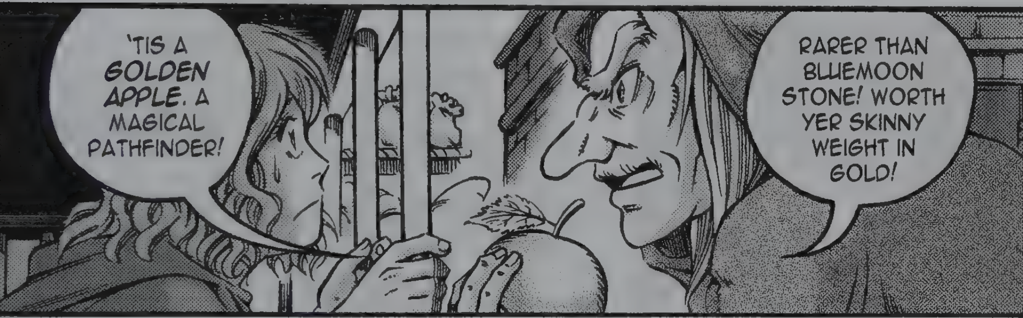




It looked like it had been daubed with black ink, rising from his skin in shiny hard lumps. Pylus touched one hand to his neck, giving it a single tap with his finger. His eyes narrowed, spilling with unspoken words.

Unbidden, Celsia's hands flew to her own throat. Her fingers reached under the bow of her red hood, discovering that same knobbly pattern on her own skin...

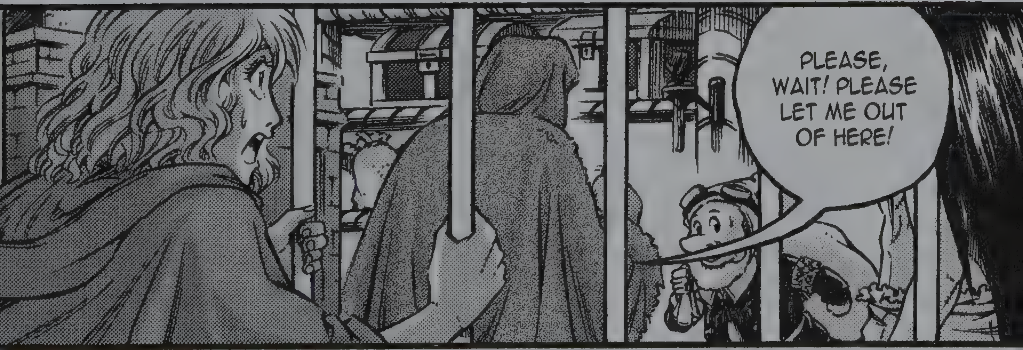
The old woman in orange stood up, and slowly walked over to her cage with the apple in one hand. Pylus looked away, and all the dwaves suddenly froze in apprehension.


RARER THAN BLUEMOON STONE! WORTH YER SKINNY WEIGHT IN GOLD!
'TIS A GOLDEN APPLE. A MAGICAL PATHFINDER!

'How'd you get this? Huh? *How?*'

Celsia shook her head, feigning incomprehension. The woman repeated the question, asking again in that strange, guttural accent. It sounded foreign to Celsia, but it also sounded as if the speaker had a childhood of scrabbling in the mud, barefoot and hungry. Hetty sometimes slurred her words like that, and Bree once boxed Celsia's ears for imitating her friend.

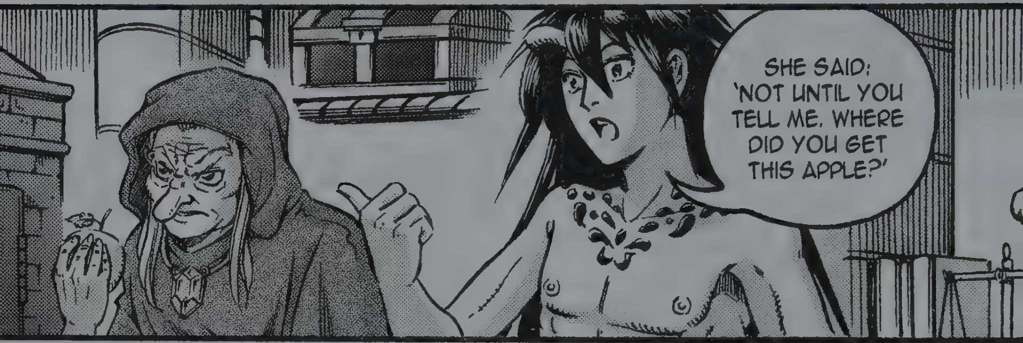
Realising she didn't understand, the old woman turned away.

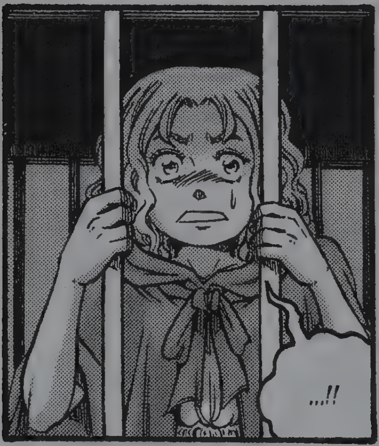

PLEASE, WAIT! PLEASE LET ME OUT OF HERE!

'Not 'til you tell me where you gotten this,' was the reply.

Celsia shook her head and shrugged. Inwardly, she prayed that the dopey smile on her face would make the old woman drop the subject.

After a while, the old woman gave Pylus a glance. He caught the look in her eyes, and immediately sprang to life.


SHE SAID: 'NOT UNTIL YOU TELL ME. WHERE DID YOU GET THIS APPLE?'



'Green and powerful magic is not fit for a wee little lass.'

'She said: great and powerful magic is not appropriate for a girl so young.'

'You gotten it from some witchy way, did you?'

'You purchased it from a witch's emporium, did you not?'

Celsia ground her teeth in irritation. What she would do, to get her hands around that turn-goat's neck and *wring all his loquaciousness from him*!

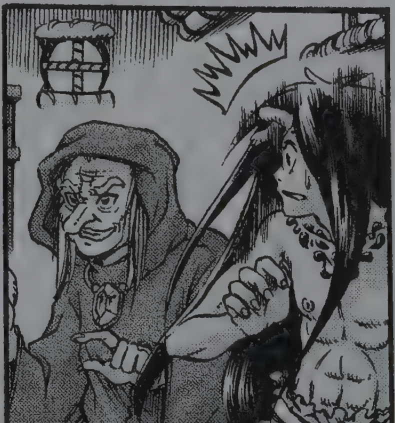
'I don't know anything,' Celsia muttered though gritted teeth, all the while shooting looks of daggered poison at Pylus. '*Please* let me out of this cage.'

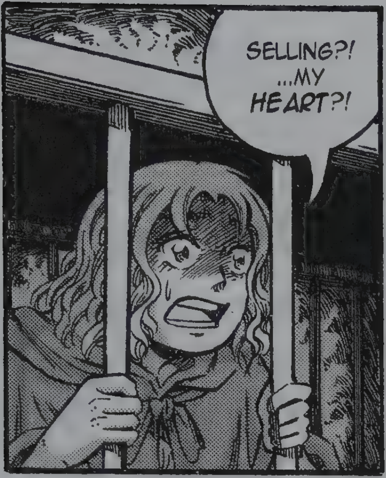
'Nit can do. I'm going to sell you. A wee lass like you would fetch good gold in a witchy way.'

'I cannot do that. I intend to sell—*What*?!'

Pylus's voice grated in horror, no doubt from what came next.

'Lass here got good parts for magic. ***Get good gold for her heart.***'

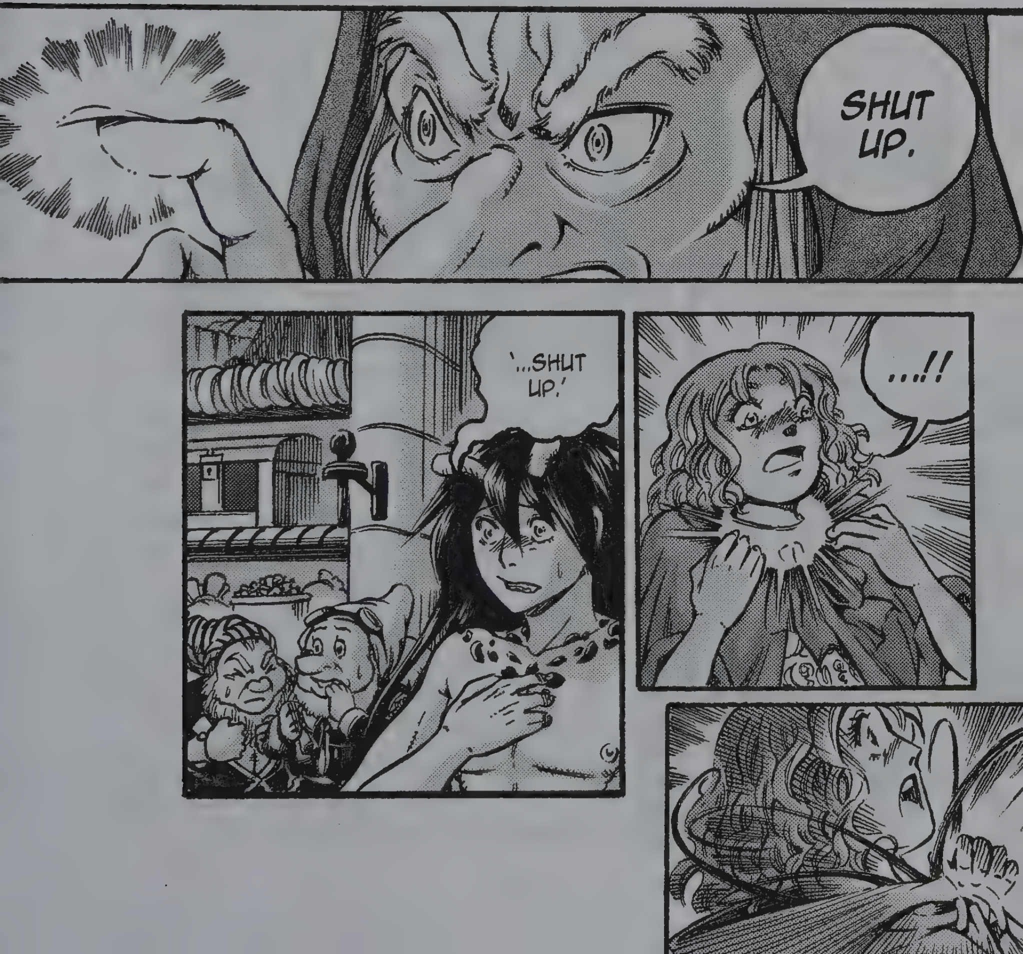



SELLING?! ...MY HEART?!

All of Celsia's self-restraint vanished in a blast of white hot rage. A stream of angry words exploded from her.

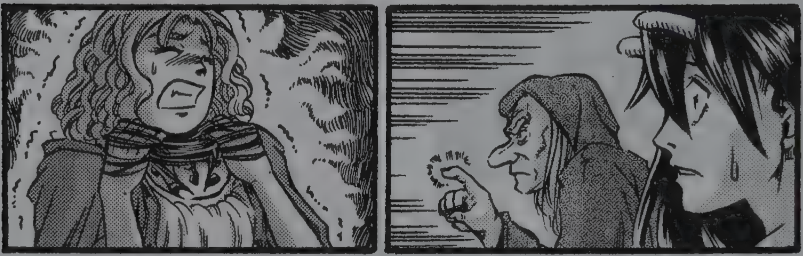
'Oh no, you are *not* selling me!!' she shouted. 'If you're angry with me for vandalising your window sill, then you can take that apple and sell it!! You *cannot* sell me as if you owned me, because you don't! Nor can you put me in a cage—'

The room suddenly lurched with an unknown energy. One of the little dwarven men whimpered, but Celsia failed to notice. Her fury blinded her to the sudden spark of static in the air, until the old woman lifted her head and looked her straight in the eye.


SHUT UP.
'...SHUT UP.'
...!!

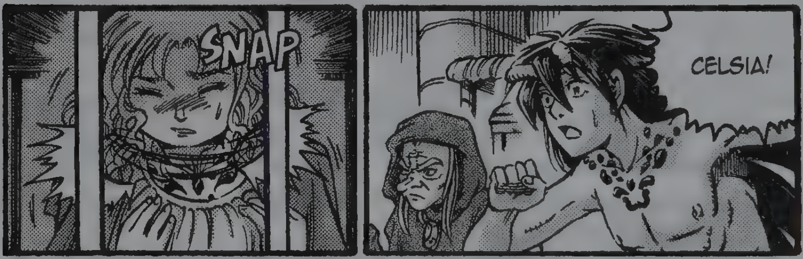
There was a burst of heat. Celsia almost screamed, as dark, wiry tendrils of hair suddenly sprouted from the shiny black patches on her neck. They wrapped around her throat like a living collar, and started to squeeze her windpipe until she could no longer breathe. Her hands fought them, but they only became tighter.

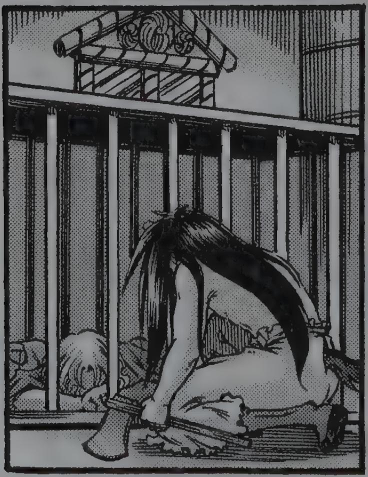
Panic coursed through her body. *Witch!* her mind screamed. *Only a witch could do such a thing!*



Her hands continued to battle this monstrous collar, while her lungs felt as if they were about to burst. The force choking her was so immense, her vision started to grow dark, the colours leaking away in streaks of brown and orange. Strength began to flee her body...

'Please, stop! She'll die! Please!'



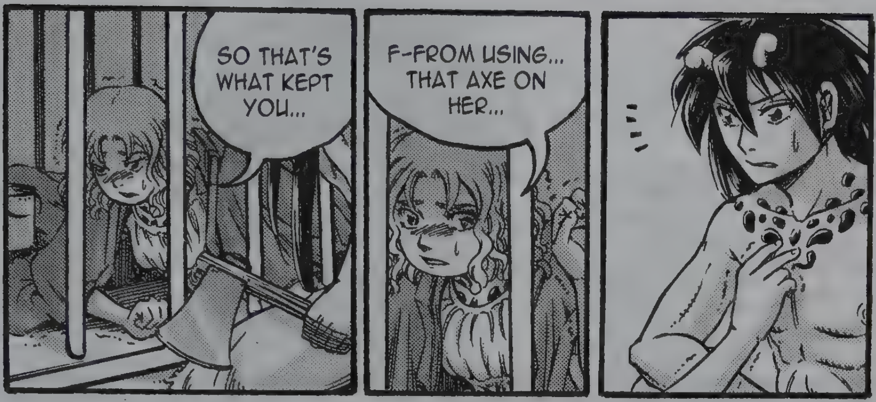


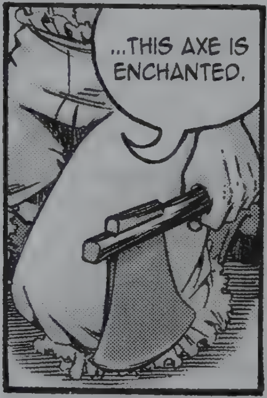
Pylus' pleas had saved her. Celsia keeled over, coughing hard as she hit the floor of her cage with a *thump*. As she lay there, sucking air into her lungs with raggedy breaths, a children's rhyme she used to sing drifted through her head.

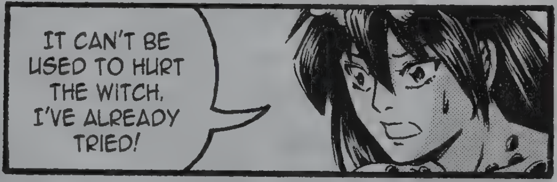
'Break a glass, skip a bath, but never cross a witch's path.'

She'd only ever thought of witches as monsters in children's tales, *but now...*

The glint of Pylus' axe caught her eye. He was kneeling in front of her, and she gave him an apologetic look.


SO THAT'S WHAT KEPT YOU...
F-FROM USING... THAT AXE ON HER...


...THIS AXE IS ENCHANTED.


IT CAN'T BE USED TO HURT THE WITCH. I'VE ALREADY TRIED!

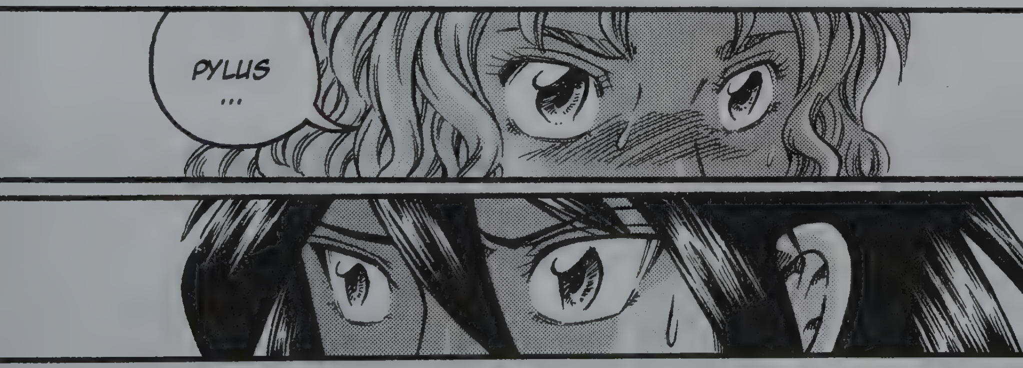
'She also seems to have eyes on the back of her head, so not even sneak attacks will work. That has to be her magic too.'

Pylus' skin felt hot to touch. The heat of his body brought Celsia some comfort, and his closeness helped calm her racing heart. She tried to sit up, but found that all she could do was to lie loose-limbed against the bars of the cage.

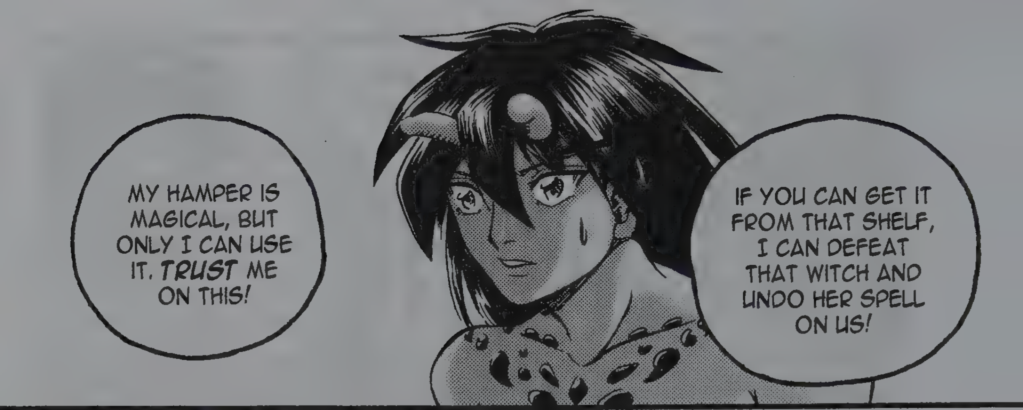
If what Pylus said is true, then this witch is invincible.

Pylus produced a cup of water, which she greedily drank from—strange taste be damned. As she gulped the water down, she could see the witch over his shoulder, standing some distance away.

No, she thought with sudden conviction. **Nobody** *is invincible.*



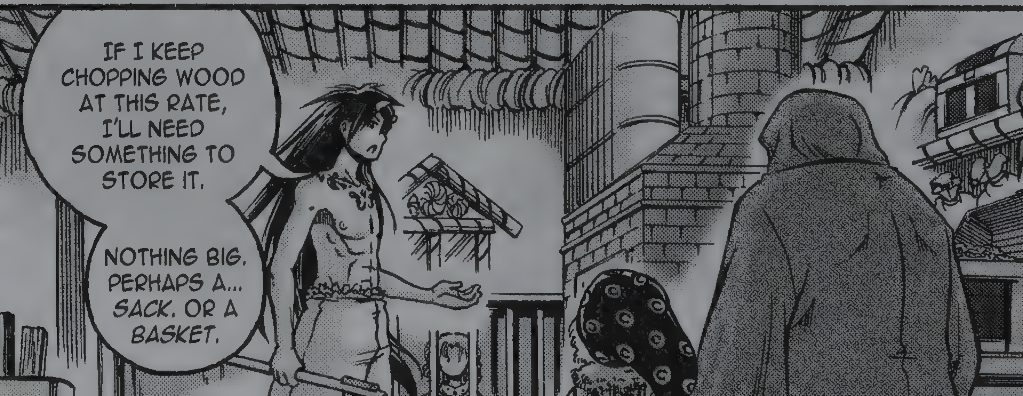
'If you can get me my basket, I can save us.'


IF YOU CAN GET IT FROM THAT SHELF, I CAN DEFEAT THAT WITCH AND UNDO HER SPELL ON US!
MY HAMPER IS MAGICAL, BUT ONLY I CAN USE IT. TRUST ME ON THIS!

Celsia mustered all of her earnestness, pleading with her eyes as she spoke. After a moment, Pylus' eyes solidified with purpose, and he gave her the slightest of nods.

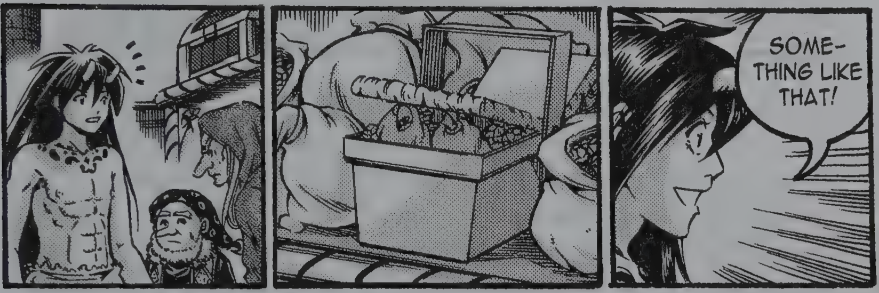
At first, Pylus didn't move. After a while, he got to his hooves and started pacing the cottage. He appeared to be heading for the pile of wood he was chopping, but then he stopped and glanced at the witch. She, sensing his gaze, turned to look as he settled near the door of the large oven that was the centrepiece of the room.

The oven was was enormous, large enough to fit a man. It was also extremely hot—licks of flame could be seen spitting from the fire beneath it. With a casual flick of his hoof, Pylus kicked the pile of wood sitting next to the oven.

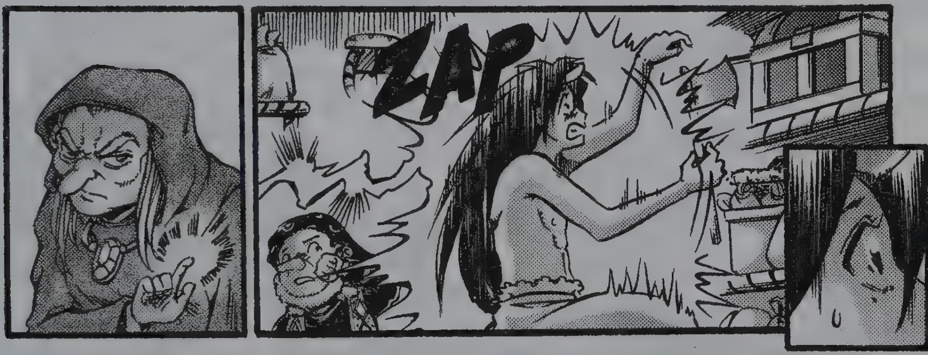

IF I KEEP CHOPPING WOOD AT THIS RATE, I'LL NEED SOMETHING TO STORE IT.
NOTHING BIG. PERHAPS A... SACK. OR A BASKET.

'I prefer to keep the cottage tidy,' he added, eyes darting nervously to the dwarves. 'There are so many of us in such a crowded space, and I, er, don't wish to get into anyone's way.'

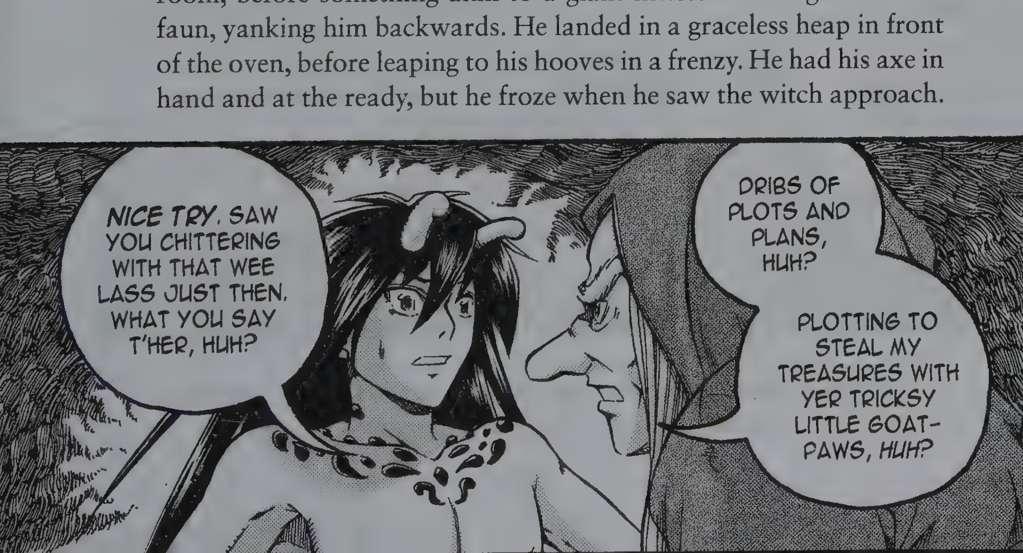
The witch's wizened white eyebrows twitched. She said nothing, watching Pylus with narrowed eyes as he scanned the room.

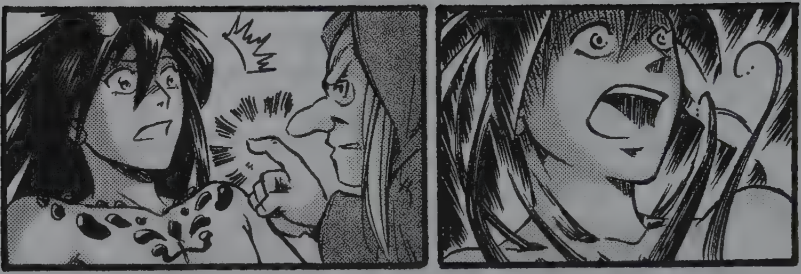

SOMETHING LIKE THAT!

Pylus eagerly strode across the room, his hands reaching out for the handle of Celsia's hamper. 'If I could just empty that—'



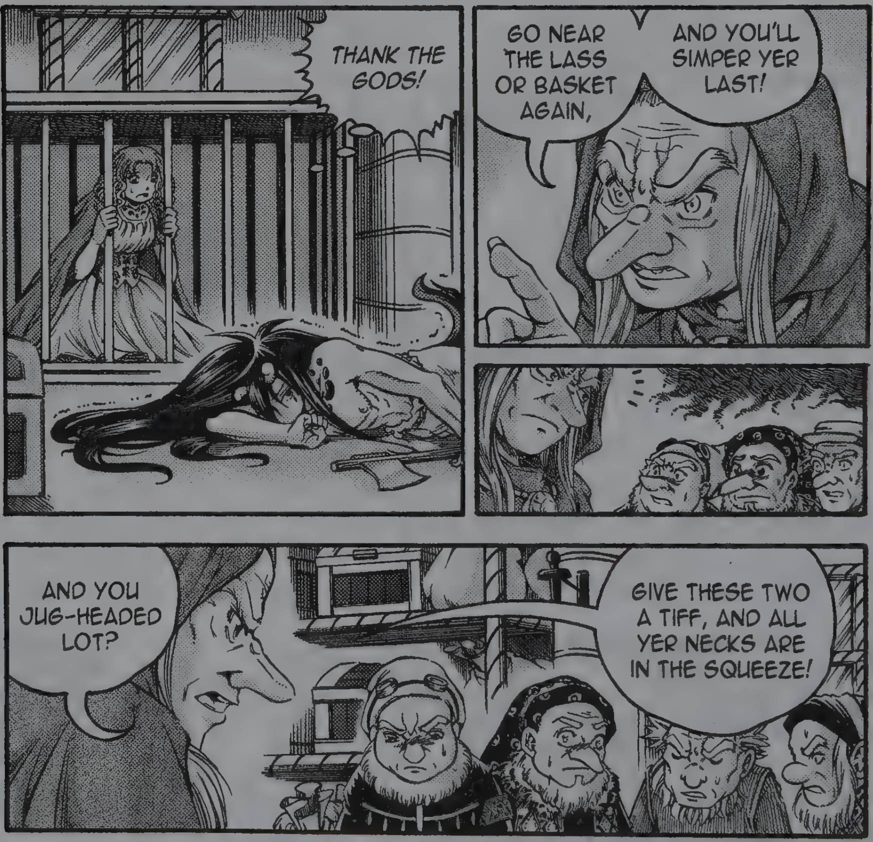
A painful cry burst from Pylus' lips. A flash of light filled the room, before something akin to a giant invisible hand grabbed the faun, yanking him backwards. He landed in a graceless heap in front of the oven, before leaping to his hooves in a frenzy. He had his axe in hand and at the ready, but he froze when he saw the witch approach.


NICE TRY. SAW YOU CHITTERING WITH THAT WEE LASS JUST THEN. WHAT YOU SAY T'HER, HUH?
DRIBS OF PLOTS AND PLANS, HUH?
PLOTTING TO STEAL MY TREASURES WITH YER TRICKSY LITTLE GOAT-PAWS, HUH?



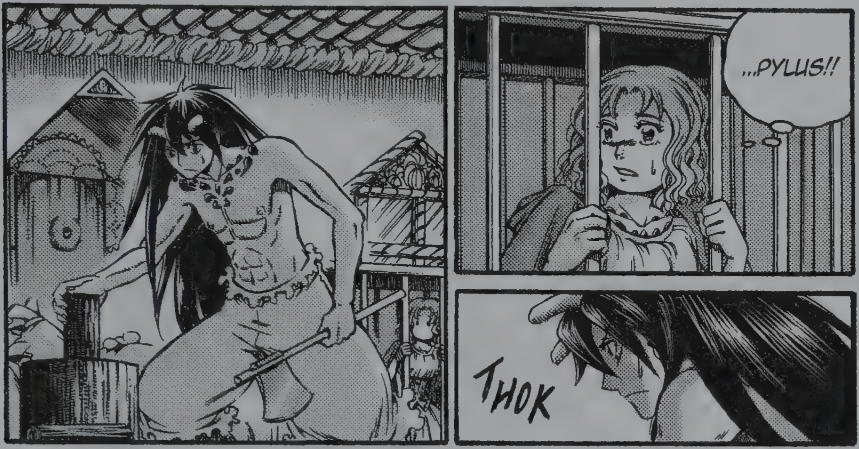
There was a spurt of claw-like tendrils, and instantly, Pylus was on the floor. Cries of *Please! Stop! He'll die!* filled the cottage, until Celsia's realised that the pleas were in her own terrified voice.

Eventually, Pylus' thrashing ceased. The tendrils vanished, and a stream of coughing and sputtering came from the faun. Celsia gave a sigh of relief.


THANK THE GODS!
GO NEAR THE LASS OR BASKET AGAIN,
AND YOU'LL SIMPER YER LAST!
AND YOU JUG-HEADED LOT?
GIVE THESE TWO A TIFF, AND ALL YER NECKS ARE IN THE SQUEEZE!

With a swish of tattered orange, the witch turned and went back to her table. The dwarves meekly followed, going back to work.

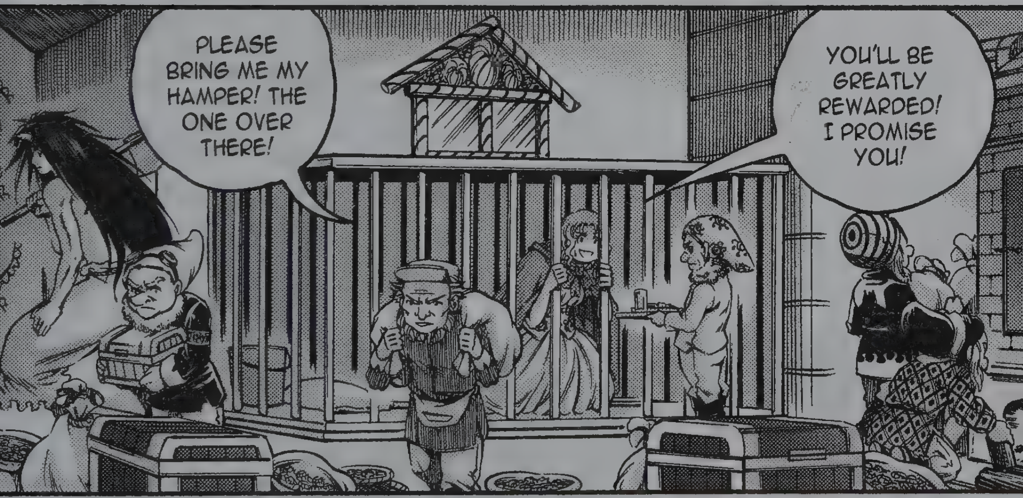
After a long while, Pylus slowly got to his feet. He staggered back to the wood pile he had been chopping.



As the monotonous sound of axe splitting wood filled the cottage again, Celsia noticed that he did not once look at her again.

* * * * *

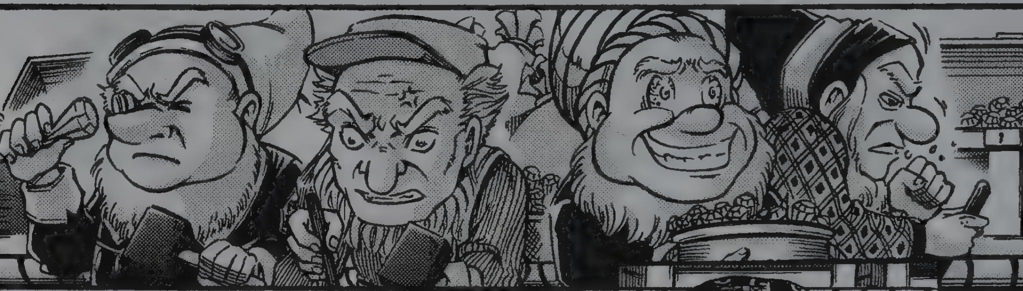
Living in a cage was unpleasant, but it gave her plenty of time to plot her escape. Grandiose plans came at the rate of one per minute.


YOU'LL BE GREATLY REWARDED! I PROMISE YOU!
PLEASE BRING ME MY HAMPER! THE ONE OVER THERE!

She whispered this to every dwarf who came near, but they turned a deaf ear to her pleas. The dwarves prepared her meals and fed her every day in grim silence, proving that countless girls must have suffered a similar fate.

Still, she was in prime position to learn the dwarves' routine. Every morning, they would rouse at the crack of dawn from a little alcove in the corner. With faces worn with defeat, they would eat a meagre breakfast, then hurry out the door with spades and pickaxes.

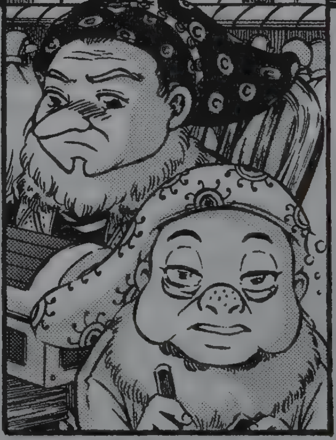
In the evening they would return, their faces black with sweat and soot. Each dwarf carried a single sack, which they then emptied in front of the witch. A jumble of rocks would fall out, many of them glittering with precious stones and metals. They would then spend the rest of the evening finding diamonds in the rough, the clink of their hammers and chisels sometimes sounding late into the night.

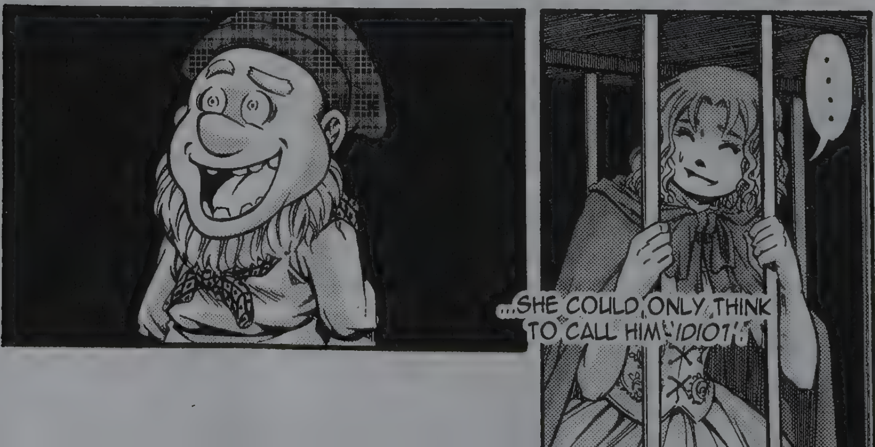


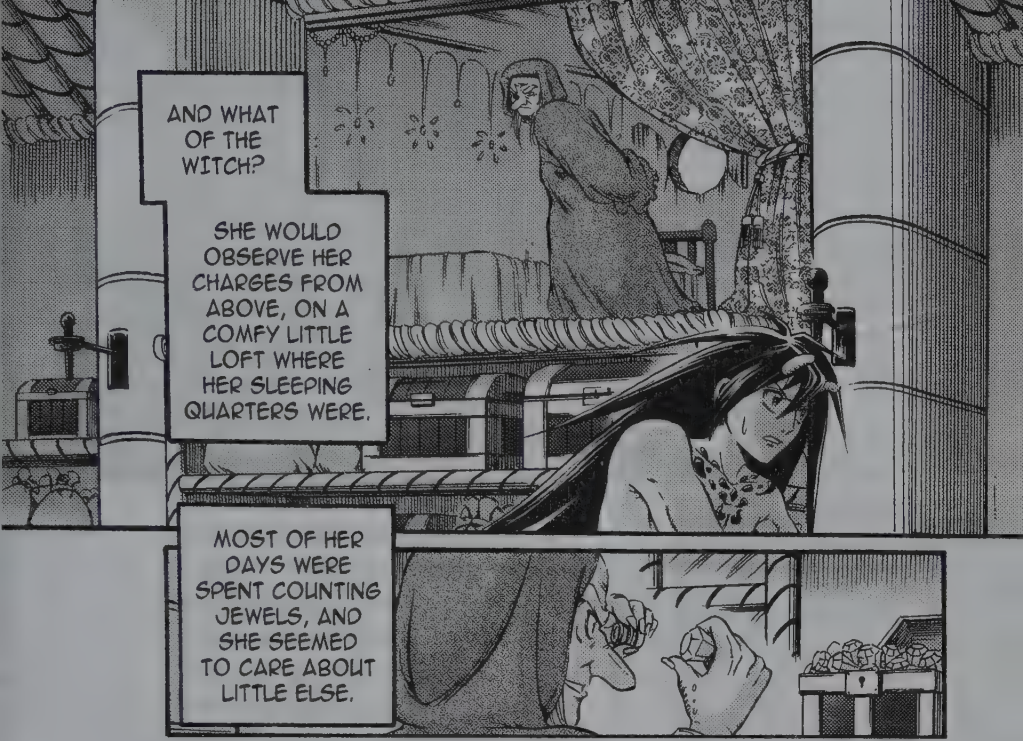
Since Celsia didn't know their names, she could only give them nicknames.

There was *Specs*, the seeming leader. Next to him was *Grouchy,* who ground his teeth with barely-suppressed rage. *Happy* had a crazed grin and an air of quiet desperation, while *Wheezy*'s lungs hacked all day long, possibly from the dust in the mines. *Morose* was so defeated he avoided eye contact with everyone, while *Sleepy*'s eyelids drooped with constant fatigue.

Then, there was *this* dwarf.

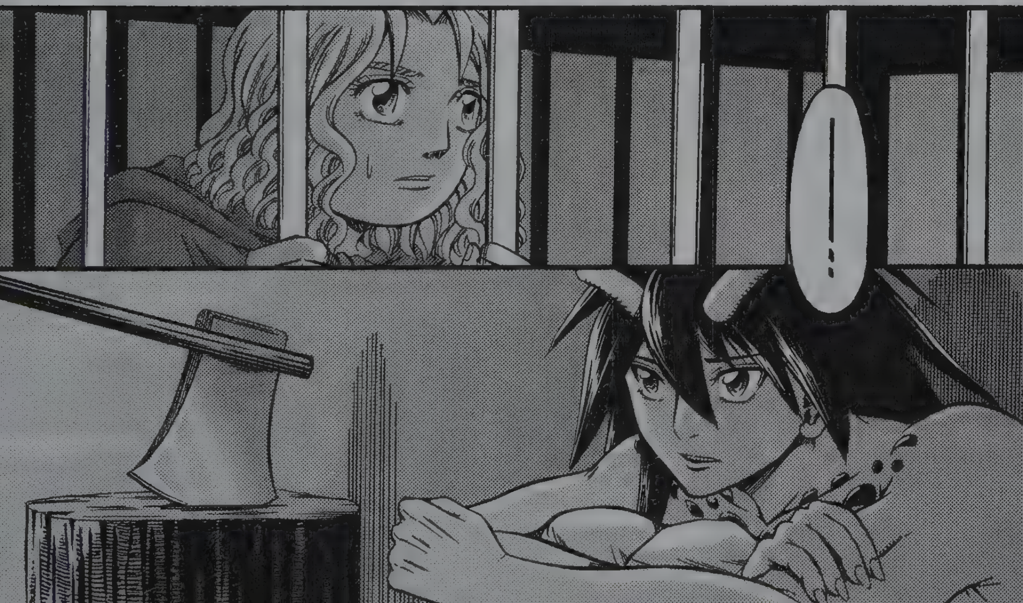


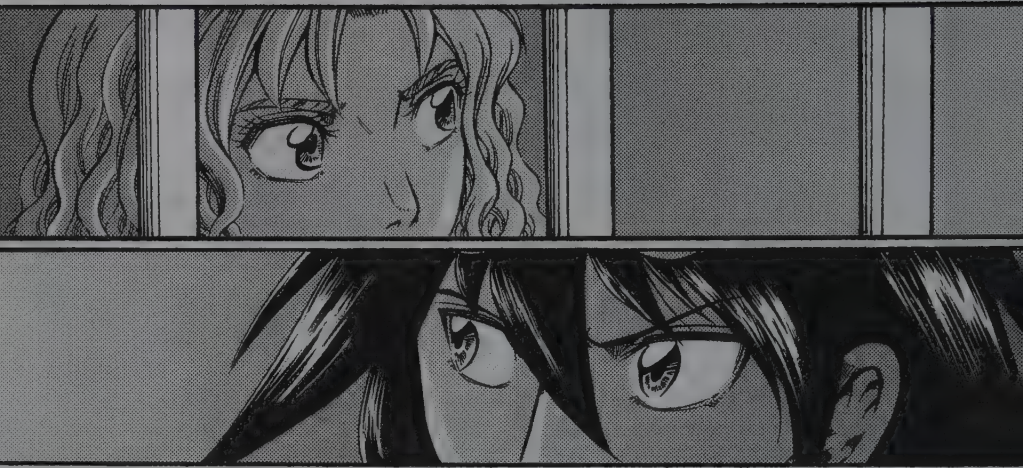

....
...SHE COULD ONLY THINK TO CALL HIM '*IDIOT*'.

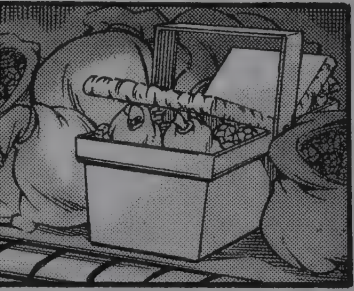

AND WHAT OF THE WITCH?
SHE WOULD OBSERVE HER CHARGES FROM ABOVE, ON A COMFY LITTLE LOFT WHERE HER SLEEPING QUARTERS WERE.
MOST OF HER DAYS WERE SPENT COUNTING JEWELS, AND SHE SEEMED TO CARE ABOUT LITTLE ELSE.

She was working the dwarves to the bone before Celsia's eyes, but at least the dwarves got bedding. Pylus didn't even get that. Apart from drawing water, all he did was find and chop wood for the enormous oven that somehow *had* to be kept heated all day and night. Pylus worked non-stop, and after his work was done, he would have to curl up on the spot with the cold stone floor as his bed.

Sometimes, in the sleepless dark of the night, their eyes would meet.





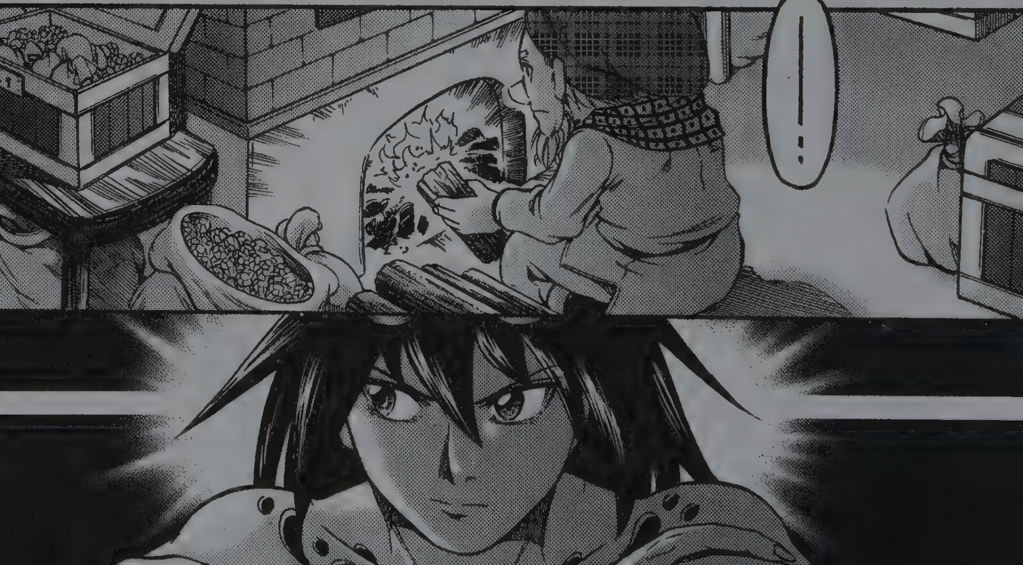


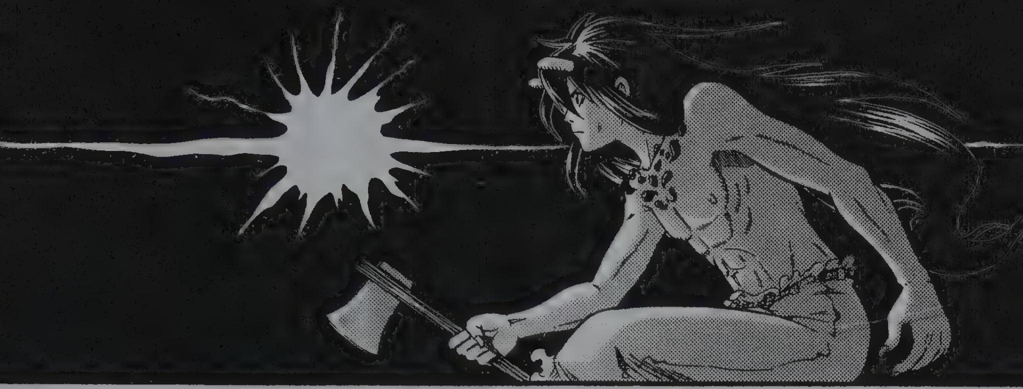
The flickering oven fire painted the darkened cottage in a sheen of orange. It made Pylus' eyes glow, and thankfully, warmed the otherwise chilly night air.

This greedy fire consumed logs of wood endlessly. It was kept alive after dark by a lone dwarf assigned to feed the flame. On the first night, it was Specs, and on the next, Grouchy. Every night for two more nights, Celsia would wake from a fitful bout of sleep to find a different dwarf stoking the fire. By dawn, that dwarf's shoulders would be heavy with fatigue.

On the following night, it became Idiot's turn.

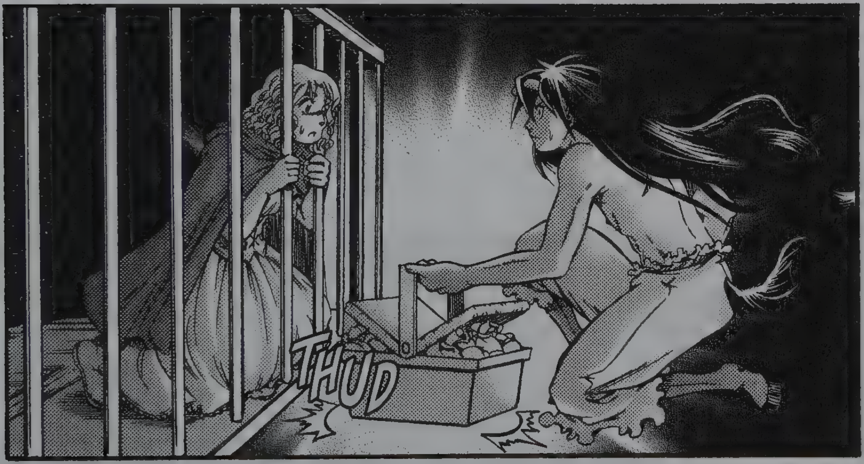
Celsia watched the dwarf amble about, patiently stoking the fire with each log he hefted. Her heart went out to his innocence; he seemed to like the task, gazing into the fire with quiet fascination.



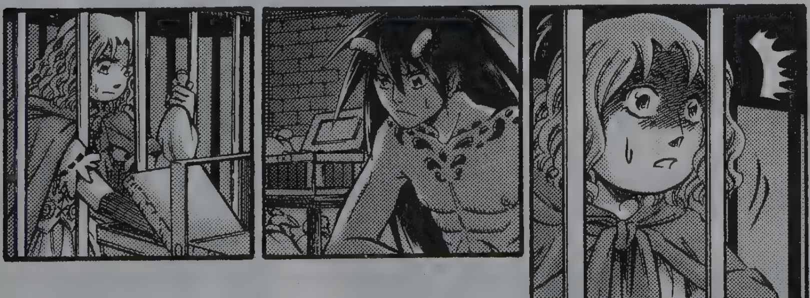


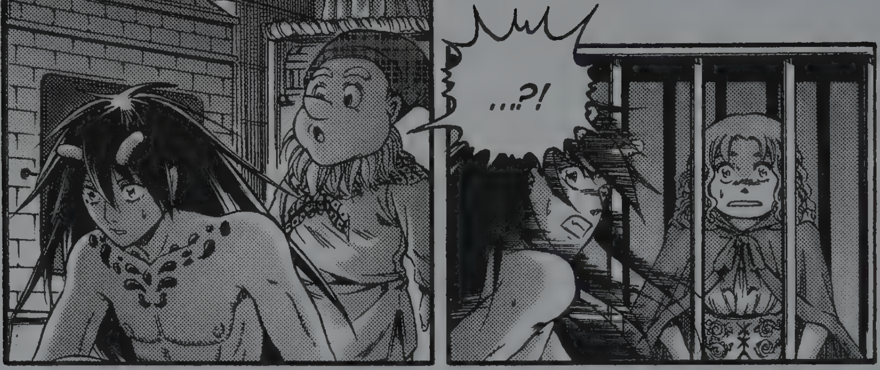
In one swift move, Pylus had peeled himself off the wall. He crossed the room in silent strides, stopping just in front of Celsia's basket. His fingers wrapped around the handle.

He was as smooth and sleek as a shadow, and Celsia had to rub her eyes to make sure it wasn't an illusion. With her hamper in one hand, Pylus walked straight past Idiot and the oven. The reflected glow of the fire burned in his eyes.



Instantly, Celsia started to empty the basket of its jewels. She worked quietly, careful not to rouse anyone from sleep.





Pylus never saw the look of childlike curiosity on Idiot's face. He immediately lashed out, grabbing Idiot by the throat and holding him aloft. Fear laced Celsia's heart as she watched—she had only scraped half of the jewels from her hamper so far.

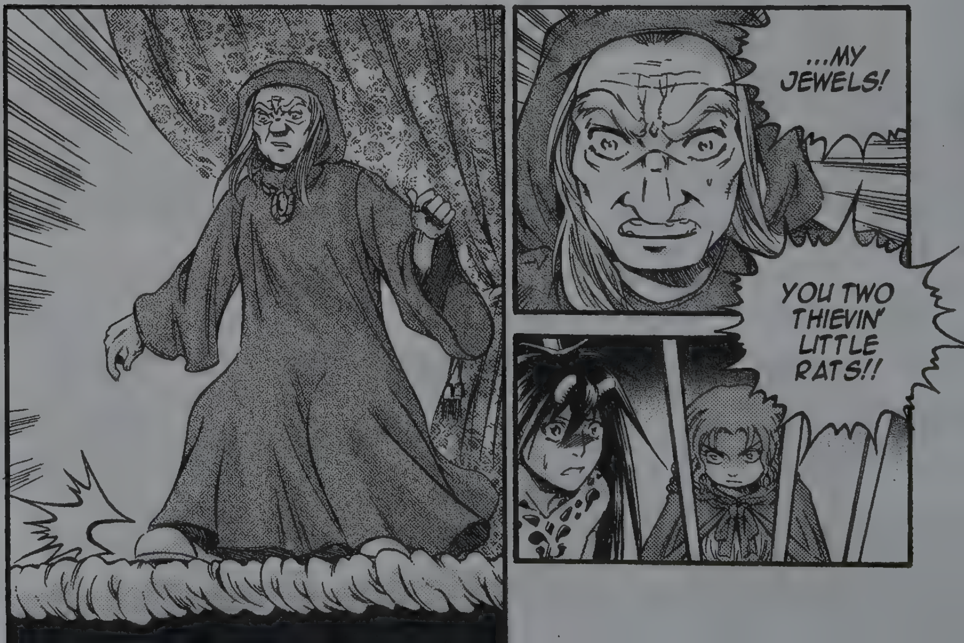
It was then that she noticed the axe in Pylus' other hand.

'*No, Pylus!*' she hissed in alarm, her fingers snaking out to snatch at his elbow. Distracted, he turned his head, just as Idiot squirmed free and sank his teeth into Pylus' hand.

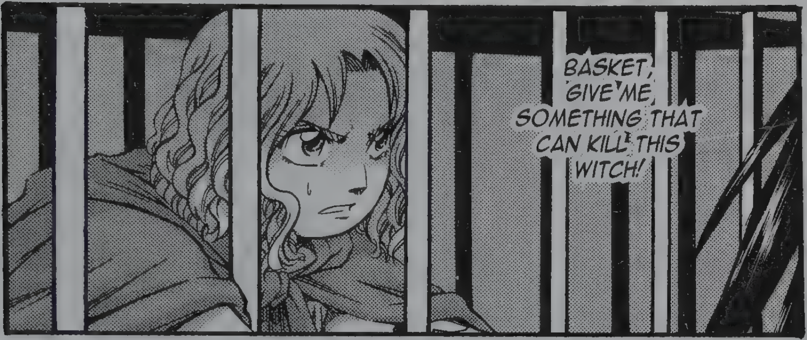
The faun choked down a cry of pain, but his grip slackened and Idiot fell. The dwarf landed right onto the corner of a bench, bouncing off it and barrelling into a pile of chests with a deafening crash.

The room suddenly became bright, as the torches on the walls lit. A long, dark silhouette appeared, cutting the room in half. A figure bound in a raggedy cloak was standing on the elevated platform that was the witch's sleeping quarters. Rustling noises followed from the dwarves' alcove, as the remaining dwarves all tumbled out of bed.

The dreaded voice sounded. *'What? What noise?'*

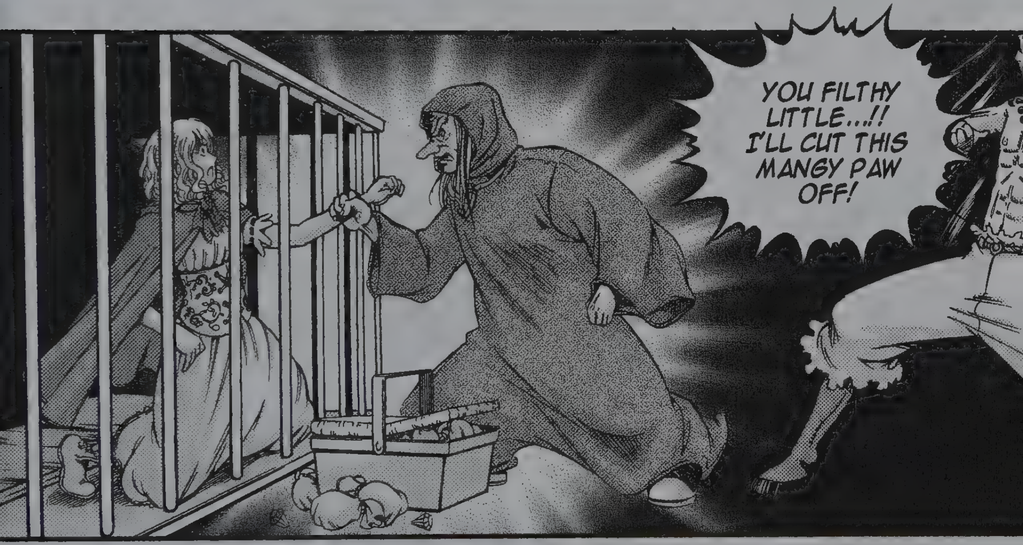

...MY JEWELS!
YOU TWO THIEVIN' LITTLE RATS!!

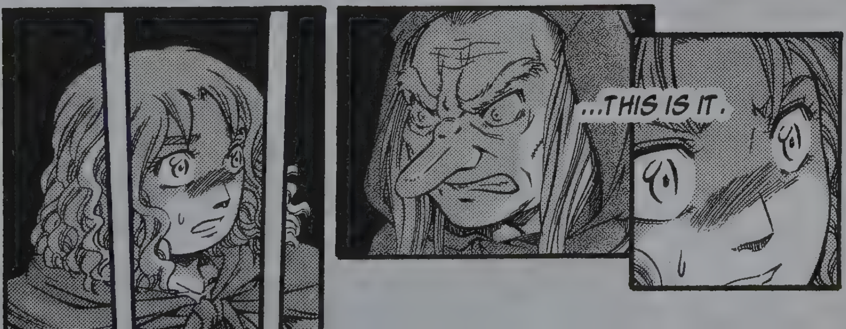
Pylus looked shaken, but Celsia felt a surge of confidence. Without hesitation, she plunged her hand into her basket.


BASKET, GIVE ME SOMETHING THAT CAN KILL THIS WITCH!

Nothing formed in Celsia's hand. Nothing happened.

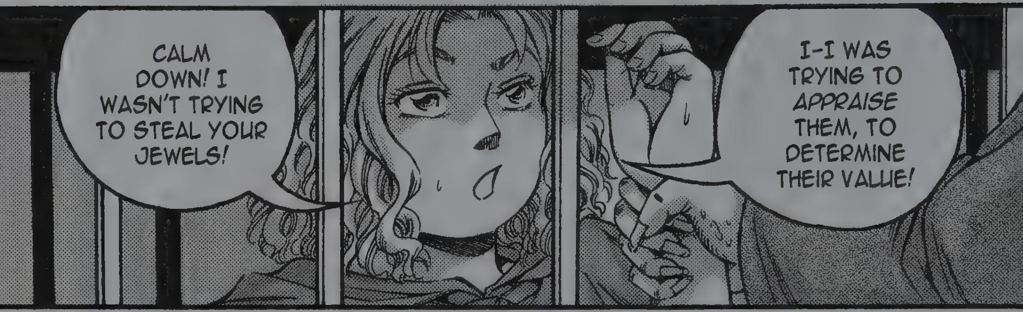
Why? Celsia's mind screamed in a panic. *Is it because I haven't fully emptied the basket?* Her hands now scrambled to turn the basket upside down, but she suddenly found her wrist locked into place by cold, bony fingers. Startled cries came from the dwarves, terror marring their features. The witch appeared to have teleported.


YOU FILTHY LITTLE...!! I'LL CUT THIS MANGY PAW OFF!

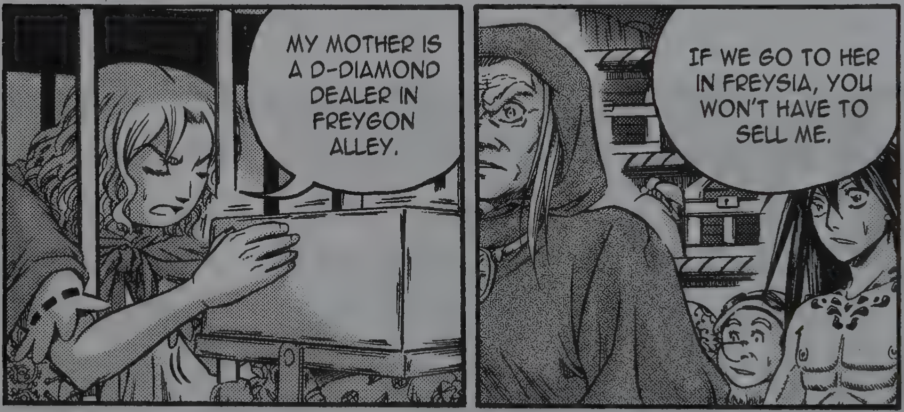


I'm going to die.

Suddenly, a jumble of words entered Celsia's mind. They tumbled out of her mouth, before she even realised her lips were moving.

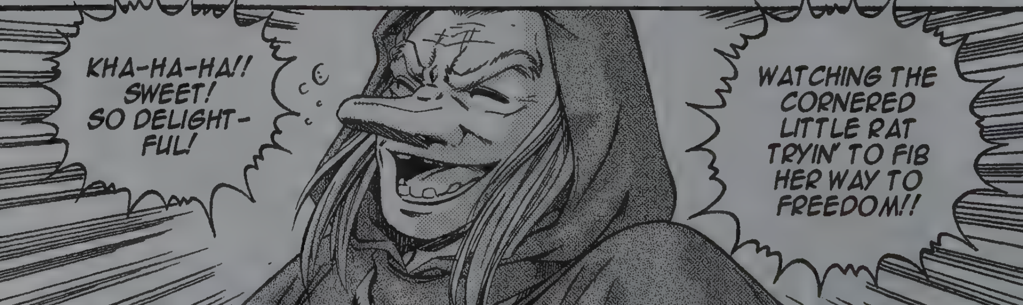

CALM DOWN! I WASN'T TRYING TO STEAL YOUR JEWELS!
I-I WAS TRYING TO APPRAISE THEM, TO DETERMINE THEIR VALUE!

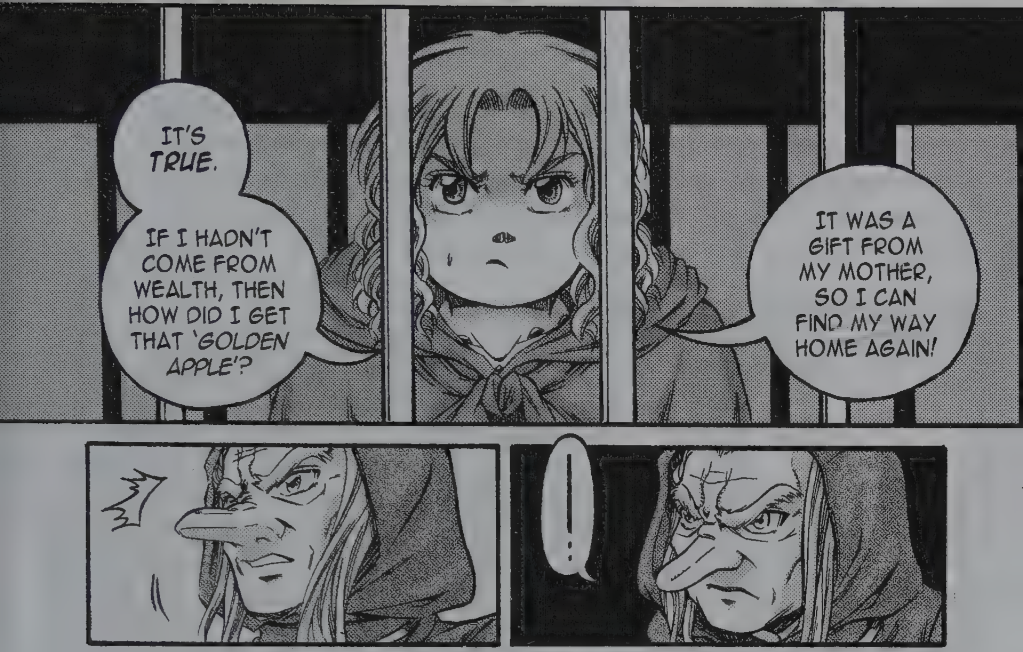
The witch was so perplexed by Celsia's sudden insolence, her grip slackened and she took a step back. Celsia's hand shot back to her basket, tipping it over and emptying all of its contents. Bags of diamonds, emeralds, and rubies skittered across the floor.


MY MOTHER IS A D-DIAMOND DEALER IN FREYGON ALLEY.
IF WE GO TO HER IN FREYSIA, YOU WON'T HAVE TO SELL ME.

'I-If these jewels are real, my mother will pay you handsomely for them. If not, she will pay you well for my safe return.'

She was babbling, and she knew it. It was all random snatches of her unrealised escape plans, but it had its intended effect. The witch had released her hand, and that was all that she needed.

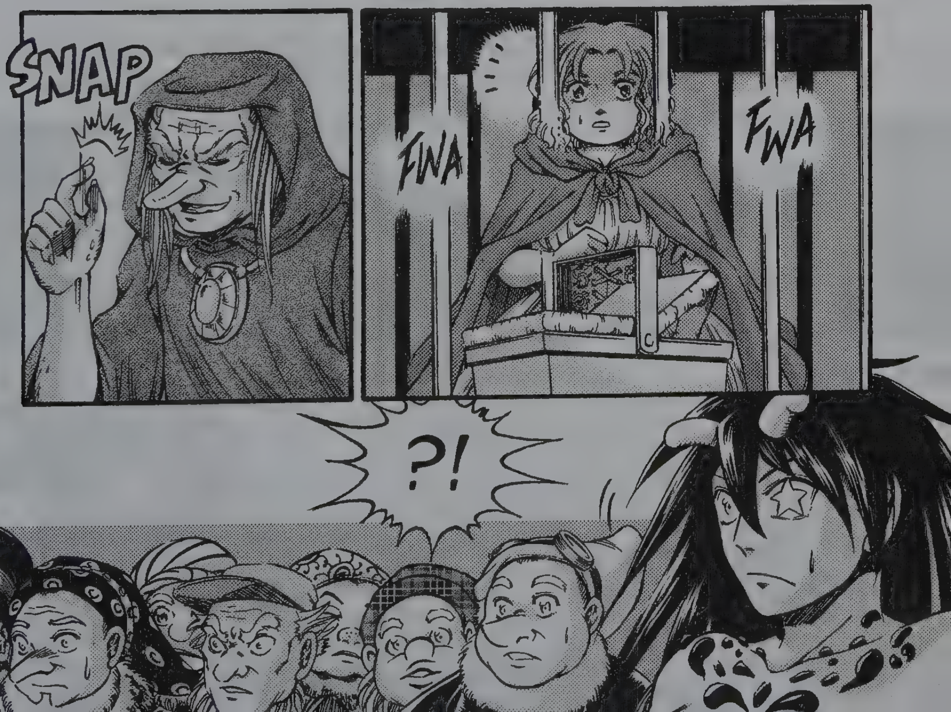

KHA-HA-HA!! SWEET! SO DELIGHT-FUL!
WATCHING THE CORNERED LITTLE RAT TRYIN' TO FIB HER WAY TO FREEDOM!!


IT'S TRUE.
IF I HADN'T COME FROM WEALTH, THEN HOW DID I GET THAT 'GOLDEN APPLE'?
IT WAS A GIFT FROM MY MOTHER, SO I CAN FIND MY WAY HOME AGAIN!
!

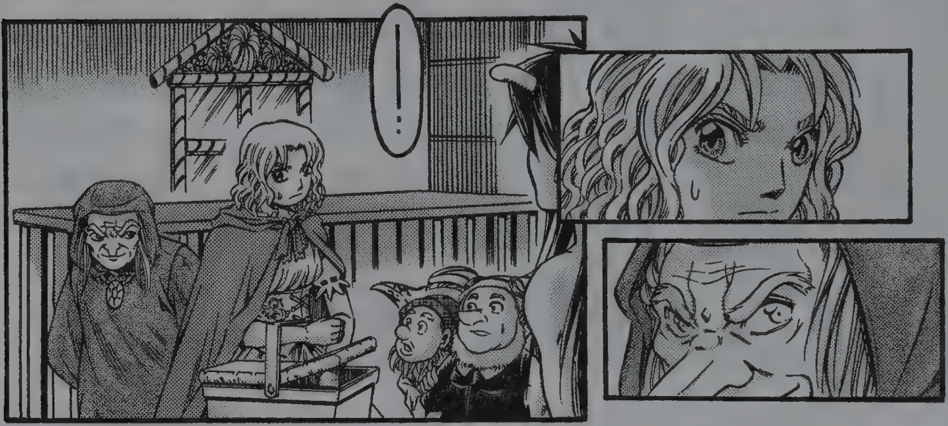
Now! Celsia thought. Her hand was fully tucked inside her hamper. *Basket, give me something that can kill this witch!*

Immediately, a hard and sturdy object took shape in her hand. It felt like a handle of some kind, so Celsia kept her hand hidden, in case it was something like a poisoned dagger. Whatever item was in her grasp, it was safer to be close to the witch before she used it.

'A'ight,' the witch said. A toothy grin split her face.

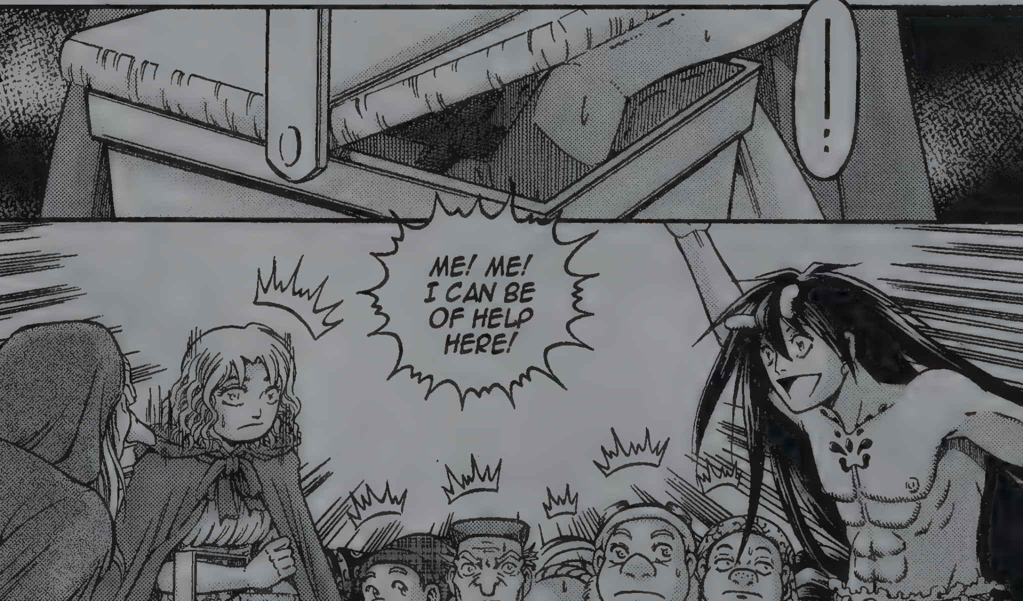

SNAP
FWA
FWA
?!

Eight startled pairs of eyes watched, as Celsia stepped out of her cage. There she stood, with chin up, shoulders back, and one hand still plunged in her hamper. Confidence buoyed her frame. Perhaps it was this about-face in demeanour that sufficiently convinced the witch that there was even an inkling of truth to her story.



The witch continued to circle Celsia, her eyes predatory. ‘Freysia is where I sell you lassies anyway,’ she said eventually. ‘Making the trip a moon ahead—I can chew and eat that. Fer a *reward*.’

Celsia returned the witch’s gaze. *Any moment now, as soon as her back is turned!* she thought. Heart pounding, she gripped what she was holding in her hamper, biting her lip to keep from trembling. Her mind started to prepare itself for violence, generating non-stop, bloody images of daggers puncturing flesh. The adrenalin caused her to sweat, making her hands wet and slippery.

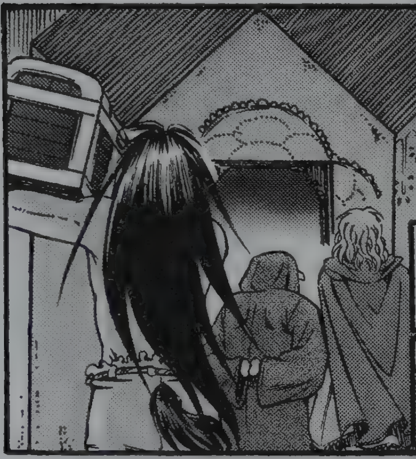

!
ME! ME! I CAN BE OF HELP HERE!

'Fauns have twice the strength of men. If your wish is to carry a chestful of jewels to Freysia, I can do so for you tirelessly!'

The witch waved her approval in an absent-minded fashion, never once taking her eyes off Celsia. Immediately, Pylus sprang into action. He chose the heaviest chest there was, and started filling it with every bag of jewels within reach until it was completely full.

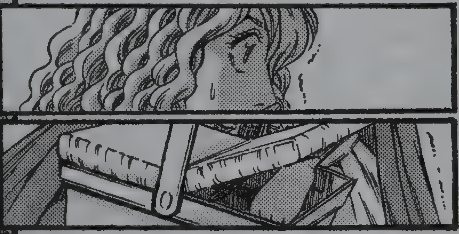
'Done!' He cheerfully announced, even giving the dwarves a wave.

Celsia watched as Pylus effortlessly hefted the chest onto his shoulders. *Amazing. Fauns really* are *that strong,* she thought.



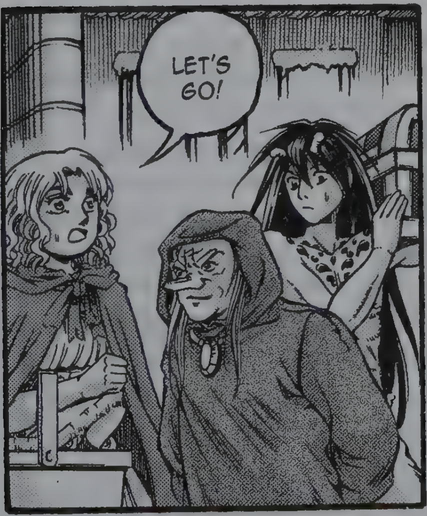
With a flick of the witch's fingers, the door to the cottage swung open. As the three of them aproached the door, a niggling thought entered Celsia's mind.

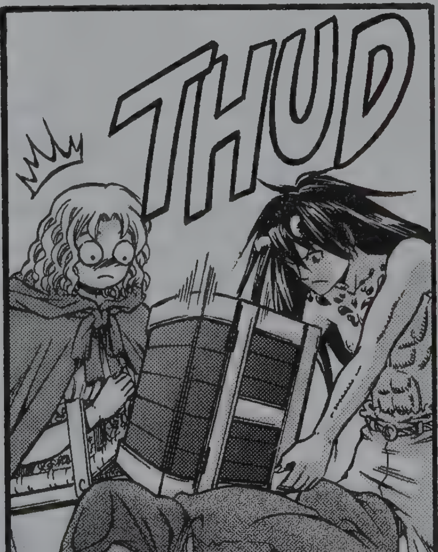
Am I about to kill someone?

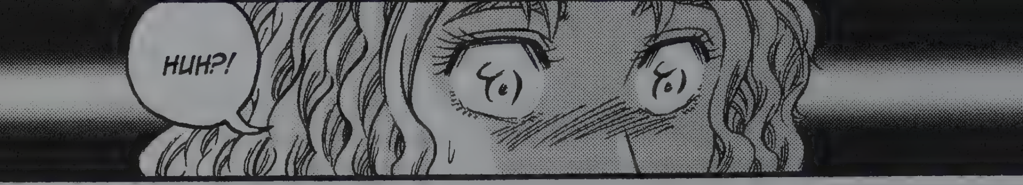


What will Grandmother think? Stepmother?

Celsia's hand grew weak. The handle she was holding seemed to burn like a brand. She found herself shrinking before the witch's scrutiny, her earlier bravado waning. *On the road,* she thought morosely. *Once we're on the road, there'll be other chances.*



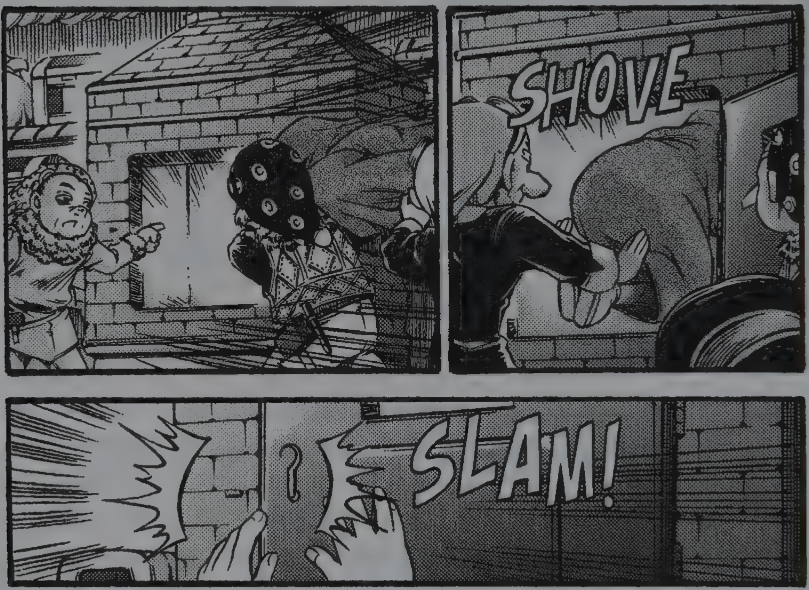




There was a sickening crunch of bones, accompanied by the shrieks of the witch. The old woman was lying prone on the floor, moaning in pain under the weight of the chest crushing her.

'Pylus, we're ready! Quickly, lift the chest up! *Now*!'

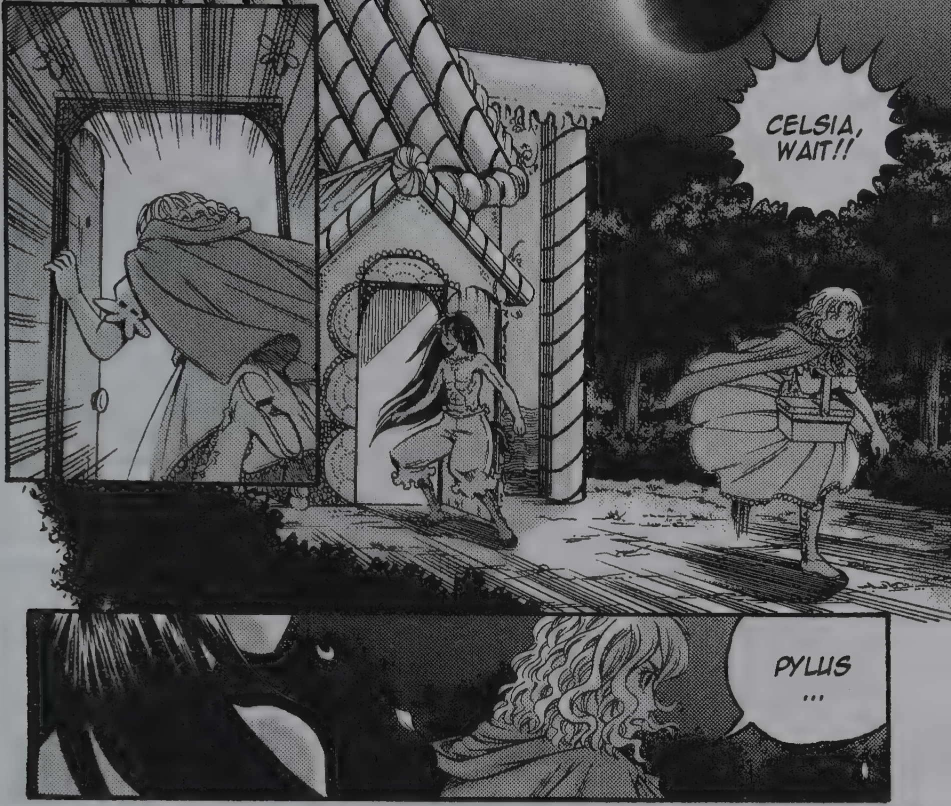
Celsia spun around, and found herself surrounded by dwarves. The moment Pylus pulled the chest off the witch, they seized her by her tattered cloak and transported her to where Sleepy stood. Celsia gasped, when she realised what was about to happen.



The latch of the oven door clicked shut. After that, there was a moment or two of silence, before a long, keening howl emerged from within the oven. It was slightly muffled by the thickness of the cast iron, but the cries were unmistakably human—and unrelenting.

The screams chilled Celsia to the bone. Her hand slid out of her basket, empty and forgotten. With her thoughts scattered, Celsia could only stand rooted to the spot as the dwarves started to stoke the flames. The fire leapt high and strong, fanned by the dwarves and the logs of wood they plied it with. The witch's wails started to grow faint, soon to be replaced by the stomach-churning smell of burnt human flesh.

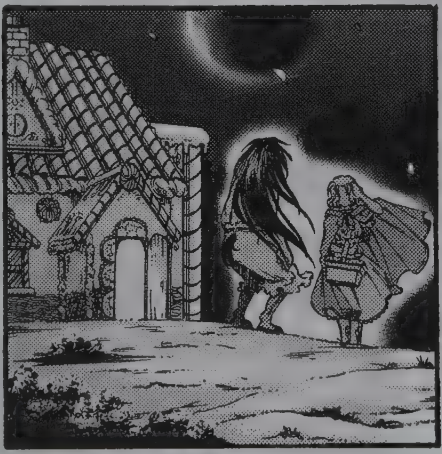
Shuddering, Celsia turned and ran out the door.


CELSIA, WAIT!!
PYLUS …

‘You and the dwarves planned that, didn’t you?’ Celsia said as he approached. ‘The wave you gave to the dwarves, just before you dropped the chest on her. That was the signal, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes. I forged an alliance with them while I was out drawing water.’

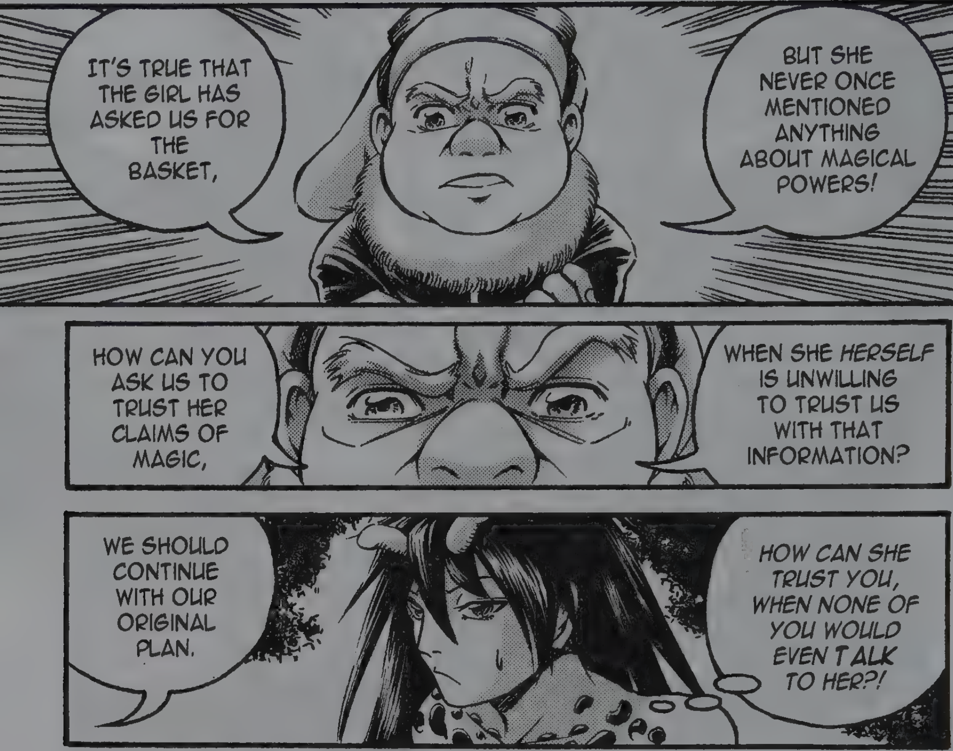
Pylus was shrouded in shadow as he approached. When he left the shade and revealed his face in the light of the quarter-moon, she could that his eyes were tinted with reproachfulness.



‘I trusted you and what you said about your hamper,’ he said. ‘However, the dwarves refused to believe me.’

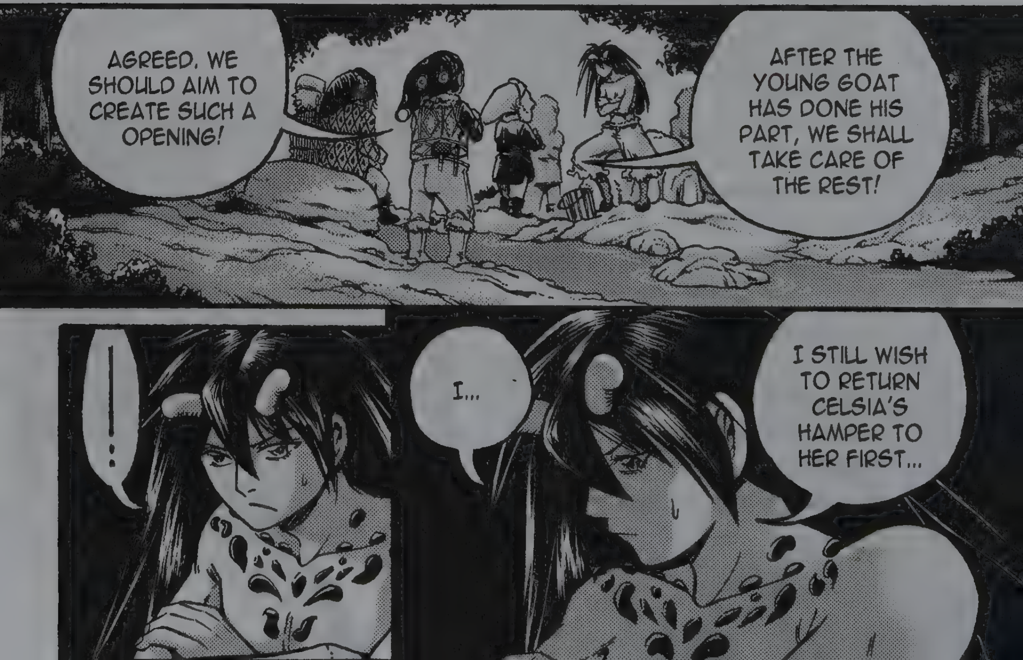
That’s hardly a surprise, Celsia thought bitterly, recalling their dourness towards her.

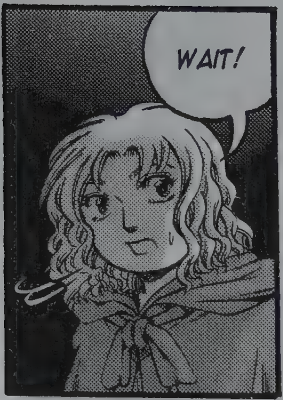
Pylus continued. ‘All the mining tools and axes in the cottage were enchanted and unable to harm her. Night attacks were impossible too, so using a heavy chest as a weapon was our last resort.’


IT'S TRUE THAT THE GIRL HAS ASKED US FOR THE BASKET,
BUT SHE NEVER ONCE MENTIONED ANYTHING ABOUT MAGICAL POWERS!
HOW CAN YOU ASK US TO TRUST HER CLAIMS OF MAGIC,
WHEN SHE *HERSELF* IS UNWILLING TO TRUST US WITH THAT INFORMATION?
WE SHOULD CONTINUE WITH OUR ORIGINAL PLAN.
HOW CAN SHE TRUST YOU, WHEN NONE OF YOU WOULD EVEN TALK TO HER?!

This is no good. It's a stalemate.

Pylus closed his eyes and sighed. 'If we use a heavy chest, our main challenge would be to find a reason to get close to the witch. To drop the chest onto her without arousing her suspicions first.'


AGREED. WE SHOULD AIM TO CREATE SUCH A OPENING!
AFTER THE YOUNG GOAT HAS DONE HIS PART, WE SHALL TAKE CARE OF THE REST!
!...
I...
I STILL WISH TO RETURN CELSIA'S HAMPER TO HER FIRST...



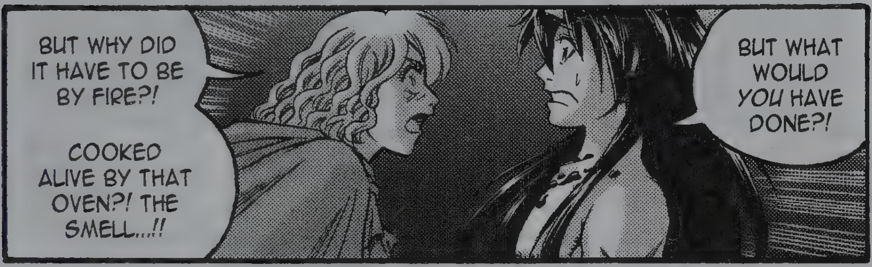
'So your plan was *incomplete* from the start?'

'Yes. With a little luck and improvisation, it all came together,' said Pylus with a chuckle. 'We even had a chest of jewels already picked out, but in the end, we didn't use it.'

Celsia nodded, her feelings numb. Her whole body still trembled, but only now did she start to realise that it was not from fear or anger. Immediately, she tried to still herself, but something cold and unforgiving had clamped its claws around her heart.

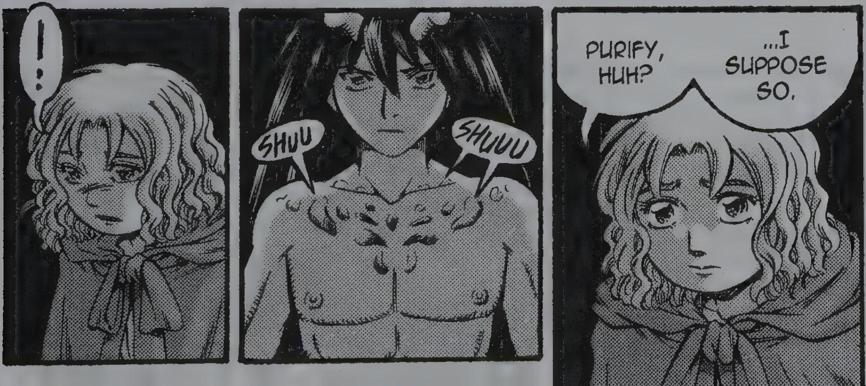
Pylus's eyes narrowed. 'She was a witch,' he whispered. 'She was going to sell you and have you butchered.'

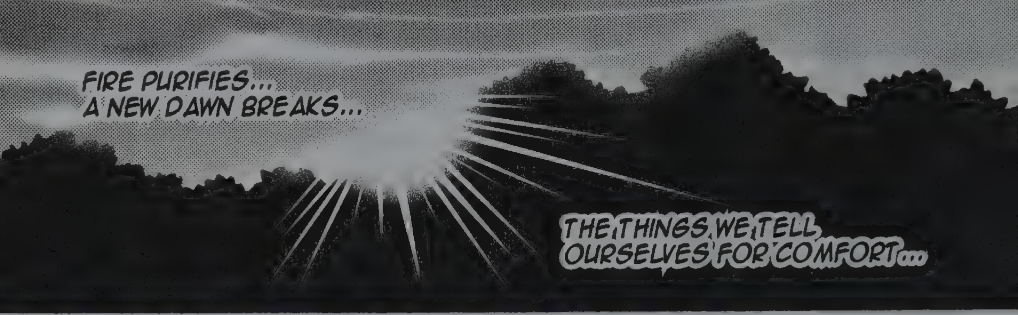
'Yes, I know, but...' Celsia started. Then, she exploded in a fury.


BUT WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE?!
BUT WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE BY FIRE?!
COOKED ALIVE BY THAT OVEN?! THE SMELL...!!

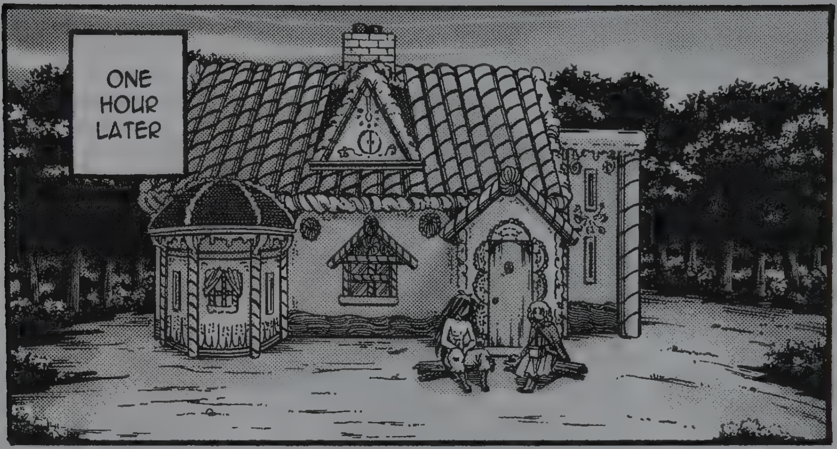
Celsia continued to shout, her hands flailing. It was shock, fear, guilt, shame and dismay all at once, pouring itself from her. She was a healer and unafraid of death, but what she had just heard and smelled was from another realm entirely, a darker and more brutal one. She had read history books describing mass murders and slaughters, but words on a page were miles away from the blood-curdling screams and smells of a *real* human being having their life torn from their body.

As if sensing this, Pylus stayed quiet and let her rage. Eventually, her anger petered out, and she just stood there, drained. He then added softly, 'Fire can purify. Think of it that way, if it helps your conscience.'




FIRE PURIFIES...
A NEW DAWN BREAKS...
THE THINGS WE TELL OURSELVES FOR COMFORT...

* * * * *


ONE HOUR LATER

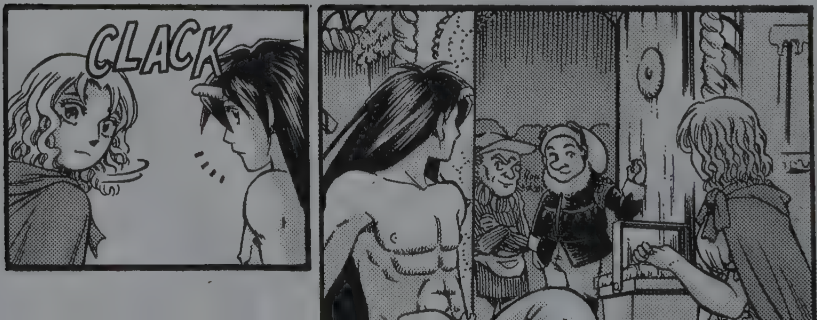
They waited for the dwarves to come out of the cottage, while the sun moved steadily up in the sky. As they sat, Pylus' fingers repeatedly stroked his neck like an itch. The absence of the witch's collar seemed to thrill him, though his face remained sombre. Celsia, on the other hand, turned to him with a small smile.

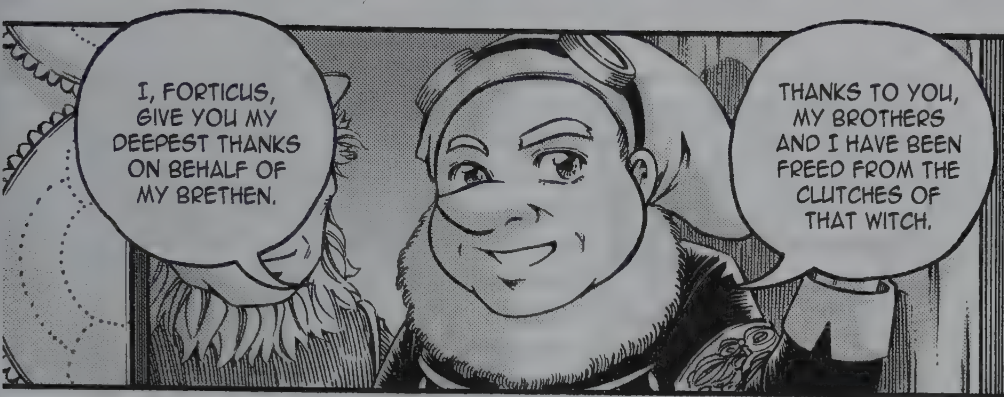
'I should thank you,' she said. 'You risked your life to do what you had to, while I was the one who failed to do what I promised.'

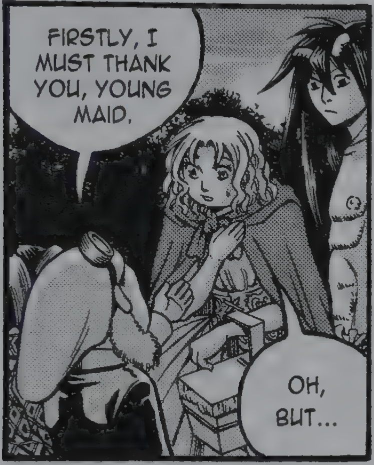
Pylus' eyebrows shot up in surprise, and he gave her a bashful look. 'Uh, no, it's... everything was accounted for. In fact, I'm glad you didn't have a hand in what happened, because you seem rather...'

Sheltered?

'Kind,' was the word he chose. 'To be honest, most humans would have danced with joy to see such an evil witch burnt to death.'




I, FORTICUS, GIVE YOU MY DEEPEST THANKS ON BEHALF OF MY BRETHEN.
THANKS TO YOU, MY BROTHERS AND I HAVE BEEN FREED FROM THE CLUTCHES OF THAT WITCH.


FIRSTLY, I MUST THANK YOU, YOUNG MAID.
OH, BUT...

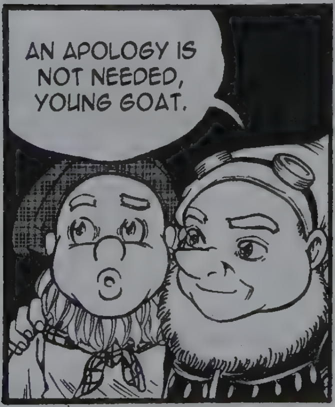
'I didn't do much,' Celsia said, shaking her head.

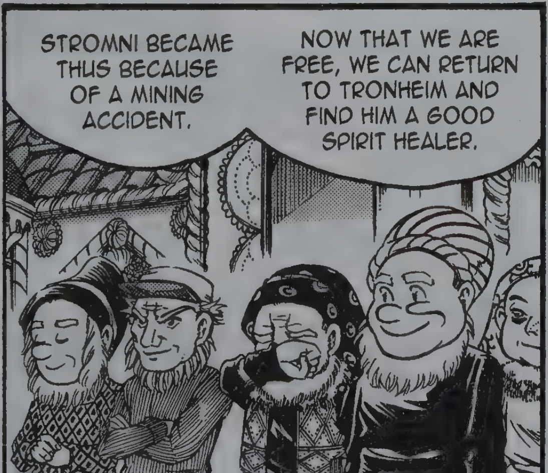
'You did plenty, young maid. You provided a distraction at a crucial point. However—'

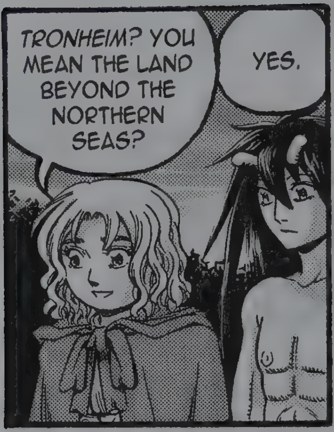
Forticus then turned to Pylus, as did the others. 'It was the Young Goat here who risked his life and proved his mettle the most. My brothers and I were unwilling to put our trust in your hamper, but the Young Goat insisted on his honour that he had made you a promise. We agreed on one condition: should you be discovered with the hamper, the witch must not blame us. She must never find out that we dwarves were involved.'

Celsia gasped. 'So that's why Pylus waited until the night—'

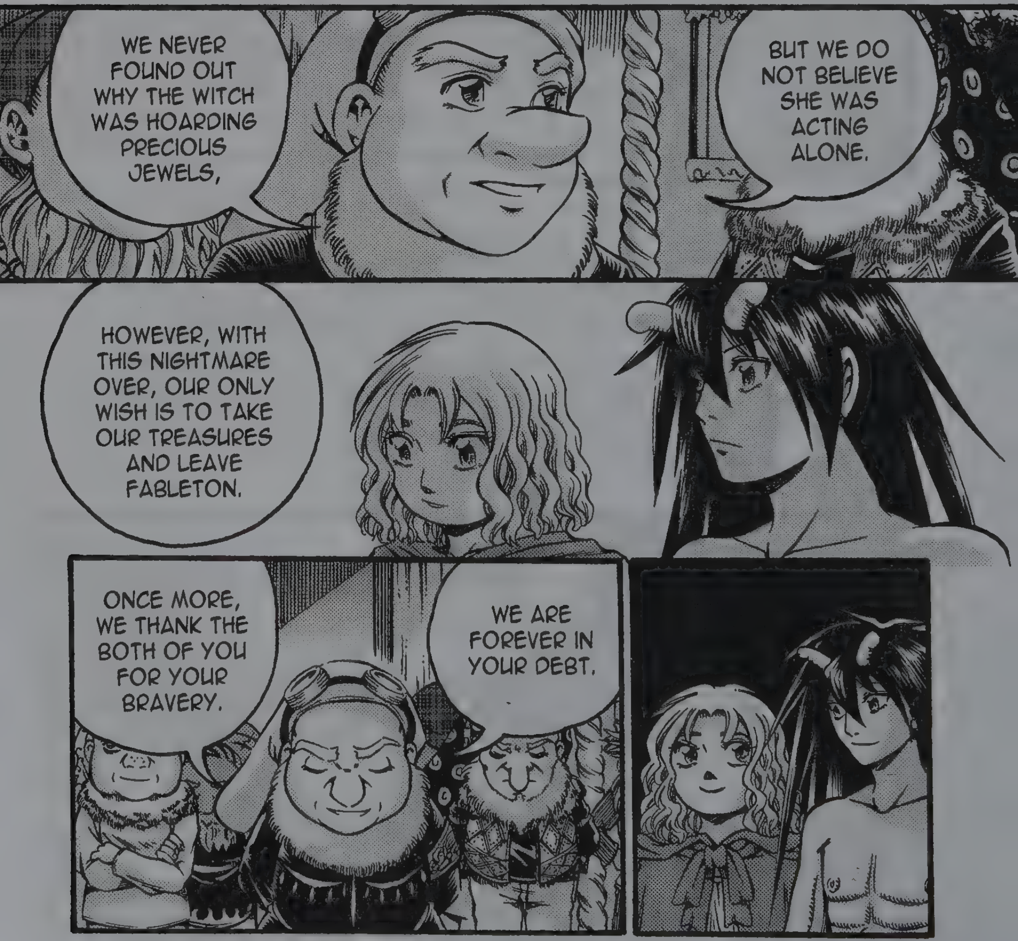
Pylus nodded, smiling. 'Should the witch have woken up after I gave Celsia her basket, Stromni was the only dwarf she would not have suspected. My apologies for attacking him, but I panicked and felt I had little choice.'

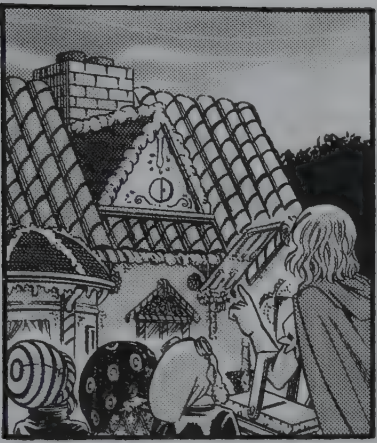

AN APOLOGY IS NOT NEEDED, YOUNG GOAT.


STROMNI BECAME THUS BECAUSE OF A MINING ACCIDENT.
NOW THAT WE ARE FREE, WE CAN RETURN TO TRONHEIM AND FIND HIM A GOOD SPIRIT HEALER.


TRONHEIM? YOU MEAN THE LAND BEYOND THE NORTHERN SEAS?
YES.

At the mention of their homeland, there was a burst of excited chatter. The dwarves started to tell their story, a tale of seven brothers who had sailed to Fableton to seek their fortune. Acting on a tip from other dwarves who had discovered precious stones in the area, they built a small cottage and began digging for jewels and valuable metals. It was then that they were accosted and waylaid by the witch, who took their jewels and transformed their cottage into a monsterous Gingerbread house. She used it to lure and capture wandering village girls to sell, while forcing the dwarves to gather more riches for her.


WE NEVER FOUND OUT WHY THE WITCH WAS HOARDING PRECIOUS JEWELS,
BUT WE DO NOT BELIEVE SHE WAS ACTING ALONE.
HOWEVER, WITH THIS NIGHTMARE OVER, OUR ONLY WISH IS TO TAKE OUR TREASURES AND LEAVE FABLETON.
ONCE MORE, WE THANK THE BOTH OF YOU FOR YOUR BRAVERY.
WE ARE FOREVER IN YOUR DEBT.

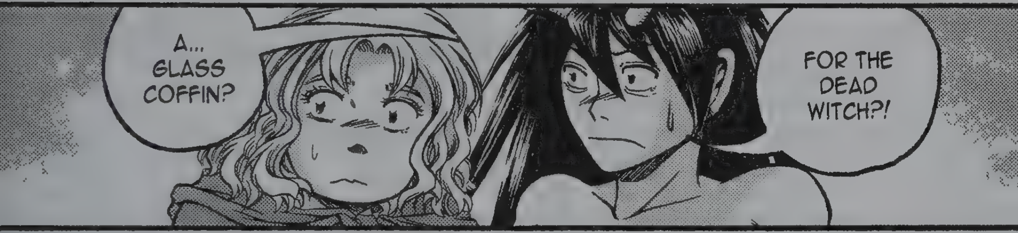


Celsia turned and gestured at the Gingerbread house. 'What will happen to this now?'

'It will likely disappear,' Forticus replied. 'It was the result of a spell the witch cast on our oven. If the fires that heat it were left to cool, then the house should return to its former state. Still, we have no intention of letting it stand after that.'

'I see,' Celsia said with a grimace. Her stomach had turned when they mentioned the oven.

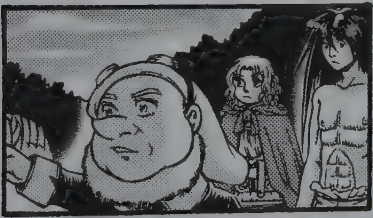
'We respect the dead too, regardless of who they were when they were still amongst the living,' Forticus continued. 'Before we burn this cottage, we shall build a glass coffin to house the witch's remains.'

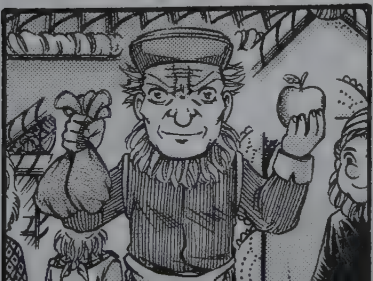

A... GLASS COFFIN?
FOR THE DEAD WITCH?!

'Is that some sort of dwarven *burial ritual*?'

'I see you are familiar with our ways, Young Goat,' said Forticus, sounding impressed. 'My respect for you deepens at every turn.'

A ghastly vision entered Celsia's and Pylus' minds, of charred, twisted limbs lying peacefully in an artfully-wrought glass coffin. The two of them exchanged glances, their mouths twisted in distaste.





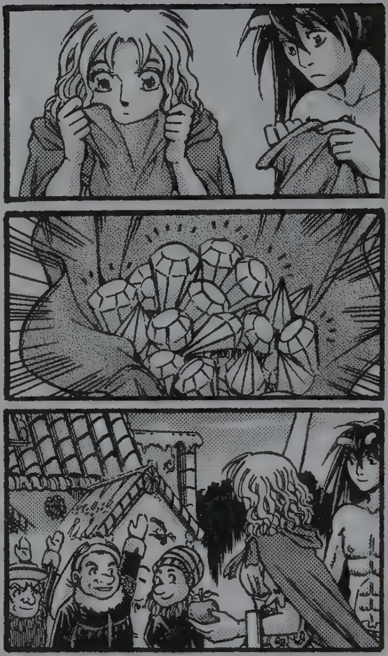
'I think we'd best be on our way,' Celsia said. Pylus nodded vigorously in agreement.

'Wait.'

Forticus gestured at Grouchy, who came forth with an apple. He held two small sacks, which he then handed to Celsia and Pylus.

'My Golden Apple!' Celsia cried.

'Please accept this as a token of our appreciation. These are the best of the lot,' Forticus said with a smile.



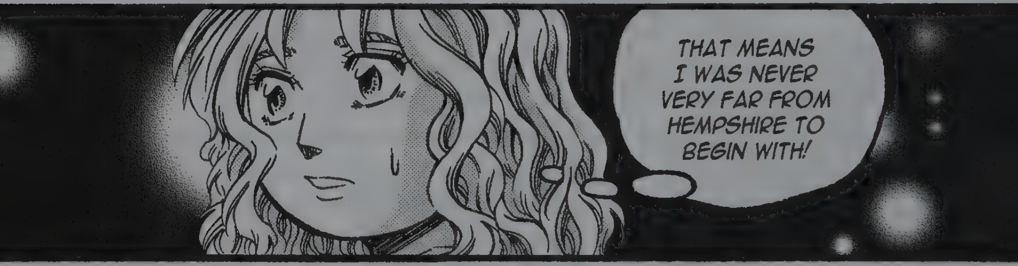
Celsia peeled open her sack, and gasped. A kaleidoscope of sparkling jewels stared back at her, winking in the sunlight.

'I...' Celsia said softly, turning to Pylus. Her eyes vacillated between hopefulness and embarrassment.

'—accept this gift,' Pylus said with a wink and a grin. 'It's equal pay for equal work. At least, that's how everyone here sees it, including me.'

After that, farewells were said. The dwarves were quick to point them to the town of Thromsby, a two-day journey downhill through dense, untamed forests.

'Thromsby? We're *that* close to the township of Thromsby?' Celsia gasped. She turned to Pylus, but he just returned her startled look with a blank stare and a shrug.


THAT MEANS I WAS NEVER VERY FAR FROM HEMPSHIRE TO BEGIN WITH!

This thought both thrilled and disconcerted her. When the exploding white orb had separated her from Quillon, she thought she had been flung to the furthest reach of the continent.

Lacking any sense of orientation, she had anticipated being a long way from home, and to be assaulted by all manners of danger in her bid to find her way. That has proven to be true, but it turned out that all of this was happening only a stone's throw away from the Southern Ranges. All along, she had been mere *days* away from the Five Shires.

How can something as fiendish as the Silver Path and the Gingerbread witch exist in these forests? My *forests?*

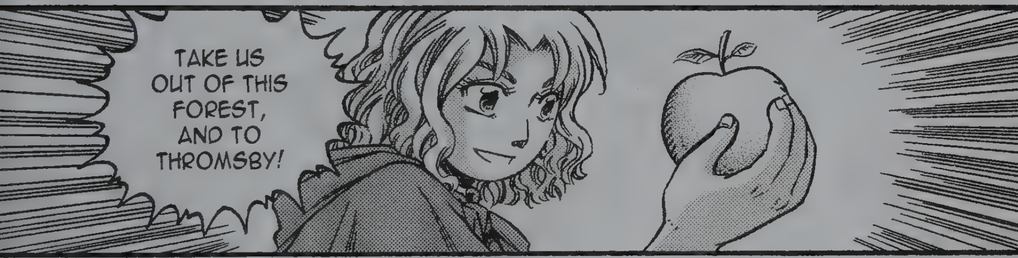
Celsia shivered. The woods had always held their secrets close, and time and again, they had swallowed the unwary traveller whole. Better to replace those unsettling thoughts with visions of a teeming human settlement, one flush with traders, merchants, farmers, craftsman and even the occasional rogue. It was exactly the sort of place Thromsby was, a bustling regional centre that resembled its sister cities Reversby and Silversby. A place that after being lost in the woods, she could feel safe and familiar in.

Thromsby was also the town her step-mother had wanted to open a trading house in, before choosing Reversby instead. Celsia may have never set foot inside it, but she knew that Bree had friends and contacts there. It had the potential to become the ideal foothold for the next leg of her journey.

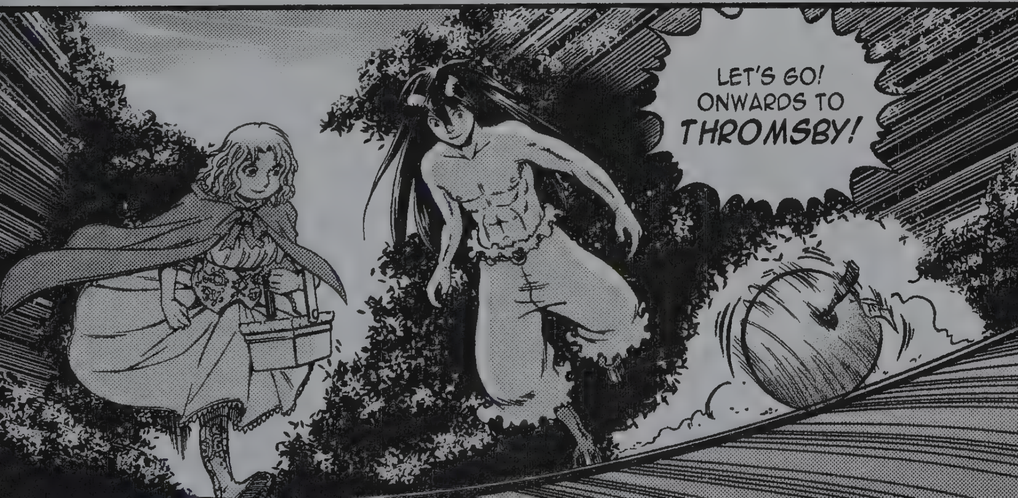
'Celsia, are we ready to leave?'

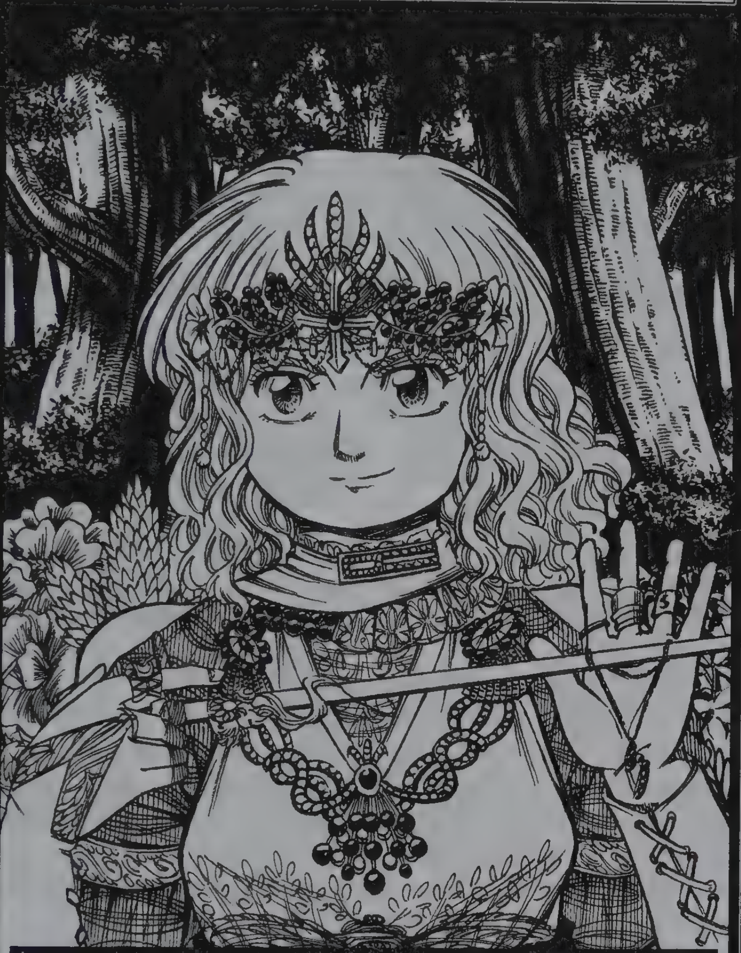
Pylus was hovering just over her shoulder. He was undoubtedly perplexed by the faraway look in her eyes.

Smiling, she turned and gave him a reassuring nod. Lifting the Golden Apple in her hand, she gave it her command.


TAKE US OUT OF THIS FOREST, AND TO THROMSBY!

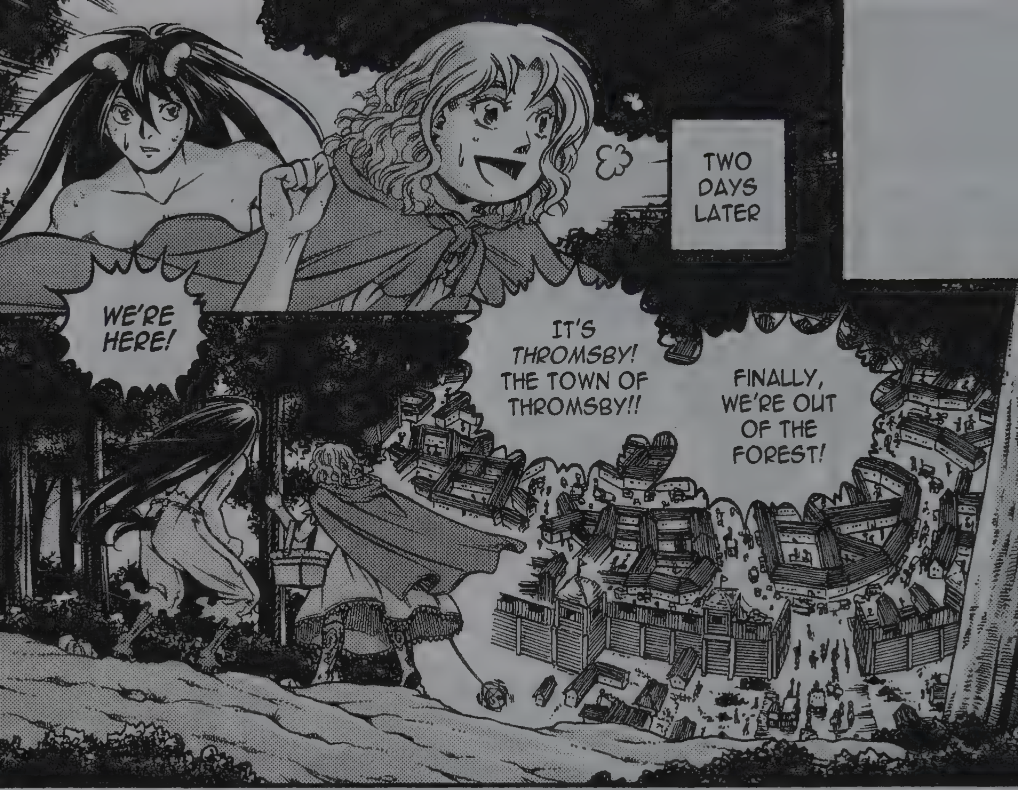
She let the apple fall to the ground. It began rolling, quickly picking up a brisk pace. It soon disappeared into the brush, just as Celsia and Pylus waved their last goodbyes to the dwarves.


LET'S GO! ONWARDS TO THROMSBY!



5: OUT OF THE WOODS

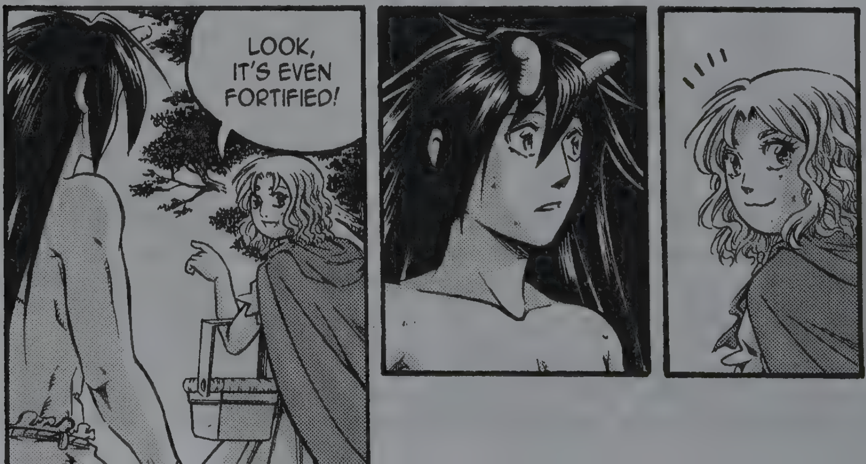
BY QUEENIE CHAN

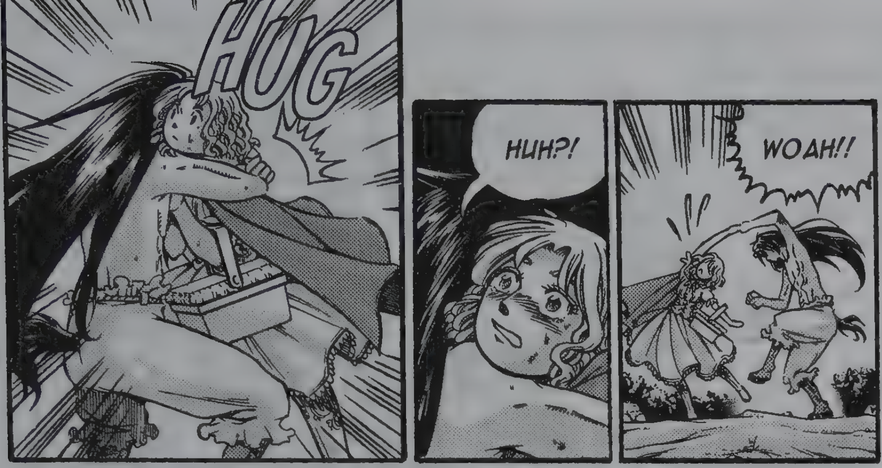

TWO DAYS LATER
WE'RE HERE!
IT'S THROMSBY! THE TOWN OF THROMSBY!!
FINALLY, WE'RE OUT OF THE FOREST!

Celsia pulled on the length of string in her hand. The string had been woven into a net and wrapped around the Golden Apple, allowing her to 'walk' it like a pet on a leash. As she pulled, the apple hopped backwards, landing into her open palms.

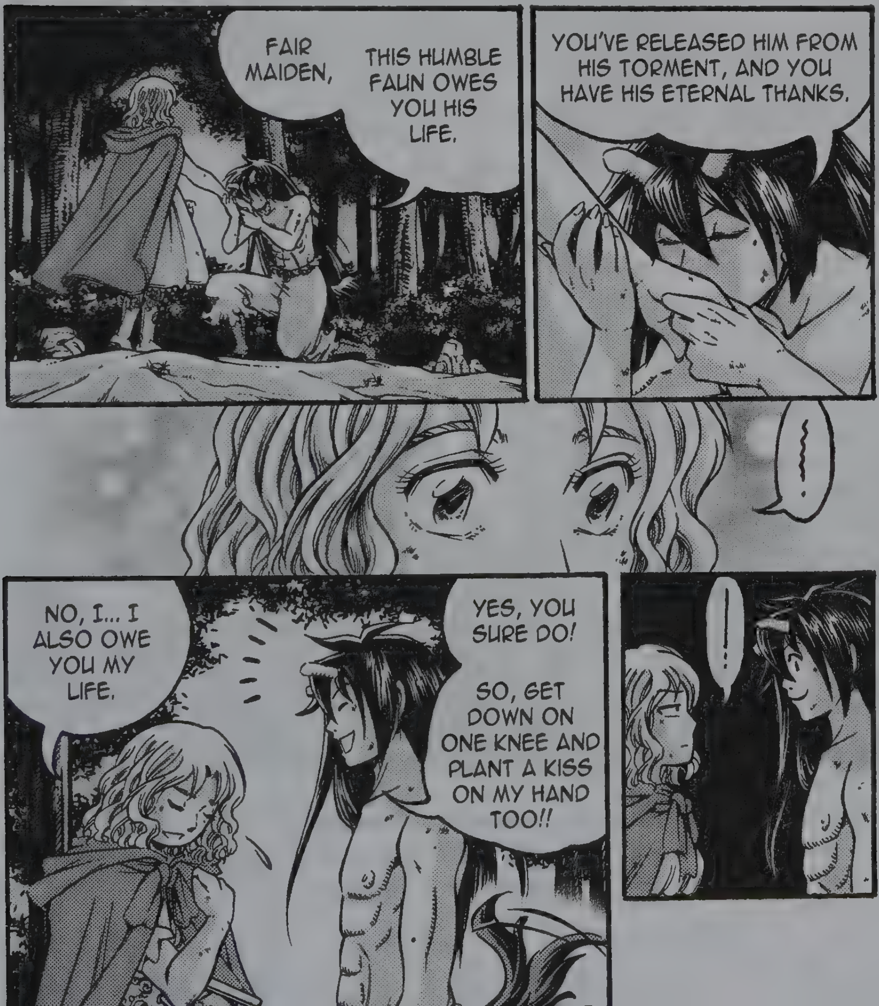
The apple had led them on a difficult path—through increasingly rocky terrain, down small cliffs, and once, across a hidden ravine. They had travelled at an unhurried pace, but Celsia was near the end of her tether by the time they glimpsed this town.

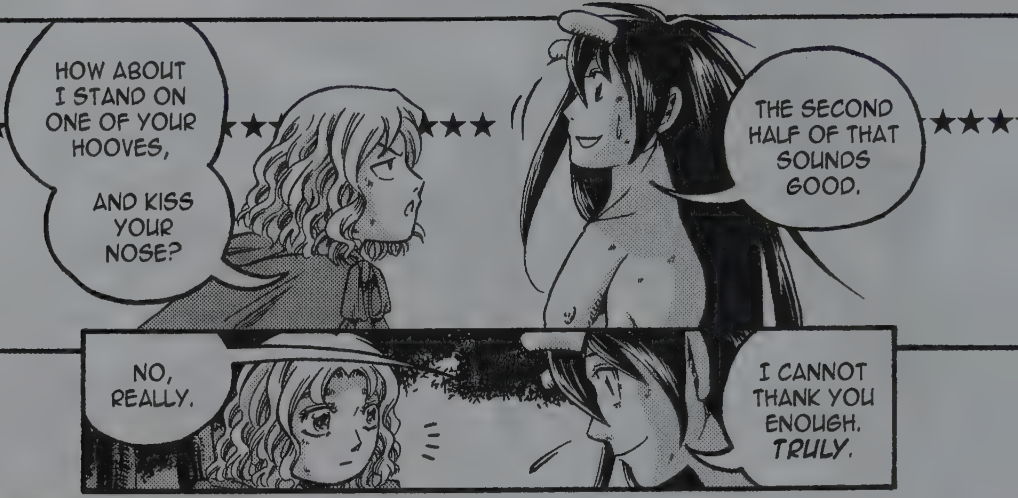
And what a splendid town it was! It was bustling and as large as Reversby, which Celsia could not resist pointing out in excitement.

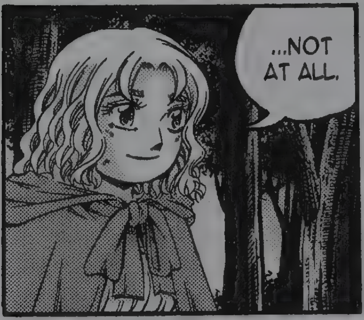

LOOK, IT'S EVEN FORTIFIED!


HUG
HUH?!
WOAH!!

She was being led in a victory dance, her legs almost tangling together as she tried to keep up with the pace. Just as she was about to grasp his rhythm, Pylus stopped. Celsia regained her footing, in time to find the faun dropping to one knee in front her.


FAIR MAIDEN,
THIS HUMBLE FAUN OWES YOU HIS LIFE.
YOU'VE RELEASED HIM FROM HIS TORMENT, AND YOU HAVE HIS ETERNAL THANKS.
......!
NO, I... I ALSO OWE YOU MY LIFE.
YES, YOU SURE DO!
SO, GET DOWN ON ONE KNEE AND PLANT A KISS ON MY HAND TOO!!
!

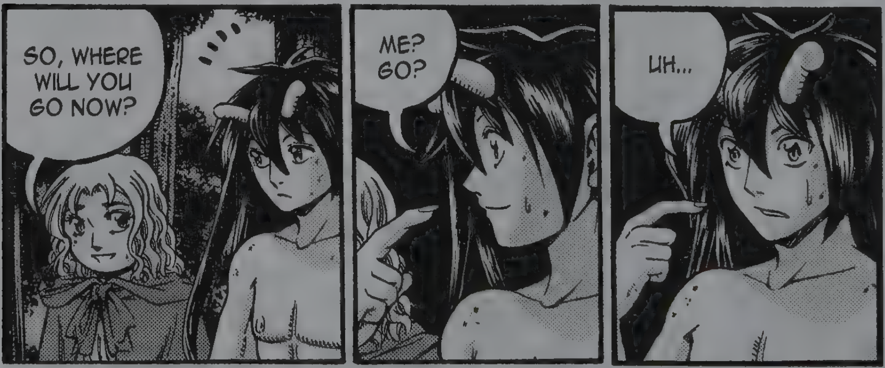

HOW ABOUT I STAND ON ONE OF YOUR HOOVES,
AND KISS YOUR NOSE?
THE SECOND HALF OF THAT SOUNDS GOOD.
NO, REALLY.
I CANNOT THANK YOU ENOUGH. *TRULY.*



The travails of the past few days had been harsh. By day, her body ached from the pains of rough travel, while by night, she found her dreams haunted by the sights and smells of burnt human flesh. Pylus had been understanding and that helped, but the ordeal of the Gingerbread Witch had cast a shadow over her, one she could not easily dismiss.

Still, seeing the genuine happiness in his eyes filled her with warmth. She had promised to free him when they had first met, and now she had upheld her end of the bargain.

So it was with a stab of regret that she asked him her next question. The intensity of her pain surprised her.

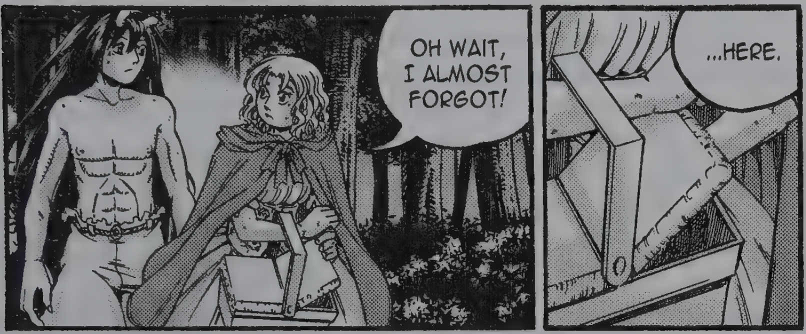

SO, WHERE WILL YOU GO NOW?
ME? GO?
UH...

'I... don't know yet,' he eventually stammered. He sounded baffled by his own uncertainty. 'It's so... *sudden*. I never expected to leave the Silver Path alive, so I haven't thought about it.'

His answer buoyed Celsia's mood. 'I'm looking to send a messenger pigeon to my stepmother, so I'll be looking for the nearest pigeon house. Do you wish to come along?'

The faun gave her a wide smile. 'I would indeed! Roast pigeon is my *favourite* dish.'

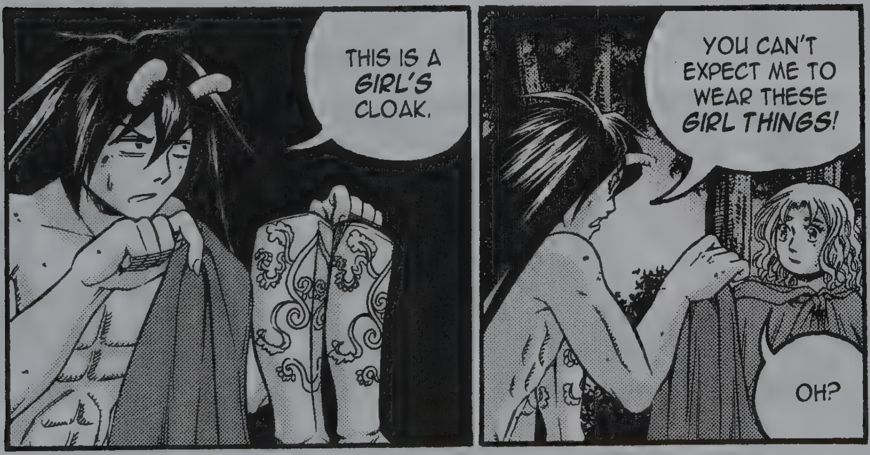
Celsia chuckled, and the two of them started an eager trot downhill. Soon, a small dirt path appeared, one of many snaking through the countryside towards Thromsby.


OH WAIT, I ALMOST FORGOT!
...HERE.

She pulled a cloak and a pair of boots from her hamper, tossing them over to Pylus.

'I don't know how welcome fauns are in this town. I've never seen one anywhere before I met you, so it's best you cover your horns and your hooves. We shouldn't attract unnecessary attention.'

'...*Wait.*'


THIS IS A *GIRL'S* CLOAK.
YOU CAN'T EXPECT ME TO WEAR THESE *GIRL THINGS!*
OH?

Celsia looked at the rose-coloured cloak and slim, delicate boots. Sighing, she returned them to her hamper and replaced them with a black cloak and a pair of travelling boots hewn from rough leather.

Men, she thought, as she watched Pylus pull the boots over his hooves. *They act as if their manhood will be compromised by the colour of the clothes they wear. People say that vanity is a woman's worst quality, but men clearly obssess over their appearance just as much.*

Pylus threw the cloak over his shoulders, wrapping himself up so thoroughly he resembled a walking swath of cloth.

'So how do I look?' he asked.

'Tall, dark, and mysterious.'

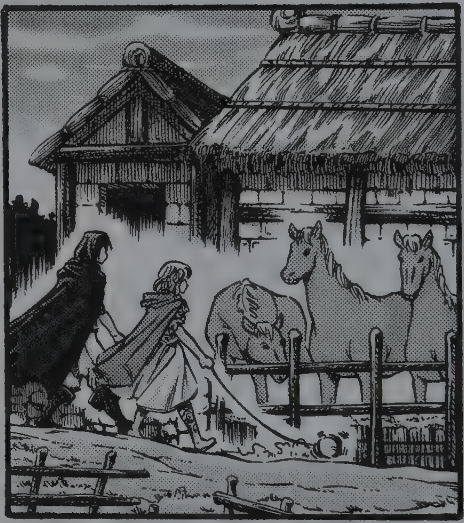
'Swooning yet?'

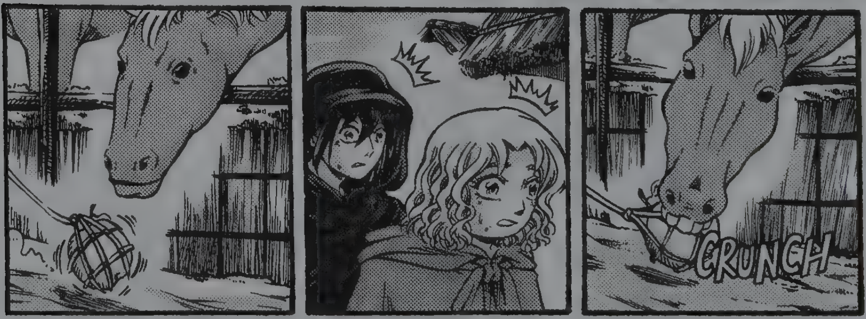
'Catch me,' Celsia said with a roll of her eyes. She then pulled the Golden Apple from her skirt pocket, along with her little net.

'Apple, take me to a pigeon house!' she ordered.

The apple slipped from her hand, rolling down the path. The two of them followed it, strolling at a leisurely pace. Ahead of them, the town lay sprawled, the tiled roofs of its houses winking in the midday sun.

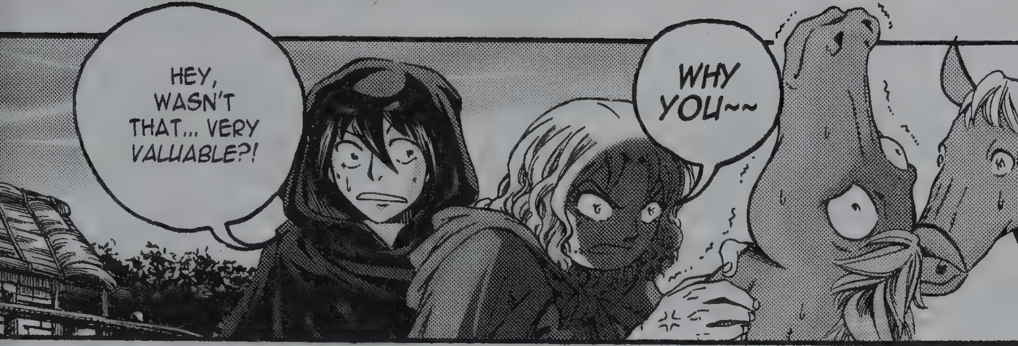
Soon, they passed some fields and a farmer's cattle pen, where a row of horses stood. Some of them stopped feeding to regard the two with curious eyes, and one horse even poked its head through a gap in the fence.





CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH.

They could only watch in slack-jawed horror. Within seconds, the apple had been crushed to a pulp between two strong, immaculate rows of teeth. String and all, it vanished in a single gulp.

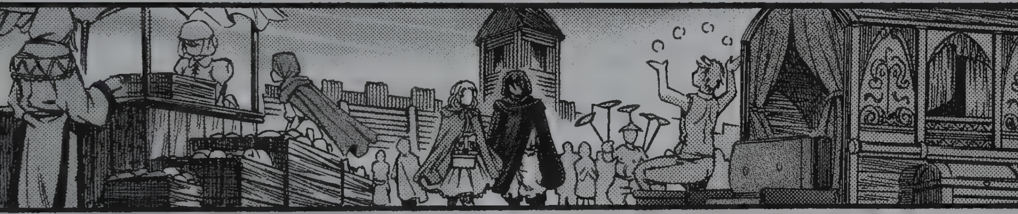

WHY YOU~~
HEY, WASN'T THAT... VERY VALUABLE?!

Celsia released the horse with a sigh. Reaching into her hamper, she produced another Golden Apple, identical to the first one.

'Again?' Pylus said. 'Either you really *love* horses, or you're a glutton for punishment.'

'If anyone's getting punished for gluttony, it should be this horse,' Celsia replied. She slipped the apple and a new ball of string into her pocket. 'I plan to to use this *in* the town, and that's only if we need it.'

It was a short distance to the outskirts, and the little dirt road soon gave way to cobblestone pavement. Thromsby was surrounded by a tall wooden wall, so scores of wagons, travellers, peddlers, and townsfolk converged at the town gates. Most of the guards, however, just let them through with a lazy wave.

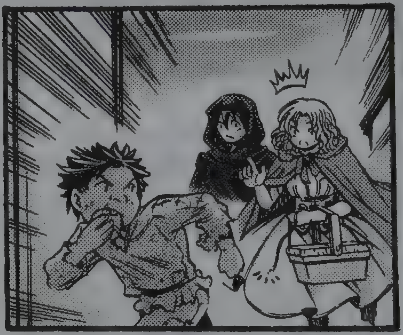


Immediately inside the town was the marketplace, thronged by scores of people eager to do their shopping before sundown. Farmers hawked their produce on makeshift platforms, while merchants plied their wares in tiny stores decked with colourful ribbons. Street urchins lounged against the walls, watching the passers-by with their shifty eyes.

Celsia quickly started to ask around for a pigeon house, but to her surprise, few people seem to have heard of such a place. Others pointed down dark alleys, or gave confusing directions.

Soon, shadows started to lengthen, as the afternoon sun descended. It was getting late, and the market was starting to clear. With few options left, Celsia pulled out her Golden Apple and the string.

'We have little time, so I suppose this is still the best way,' she said. 'Apple, *take me to a pigeon house*!'



She let the apple roll down the street, tempering its speed with the string. It had nary gone a half a street before a small, grubby shape darted out from an alleyway. It snatched up her apple, snapping the string in the process.

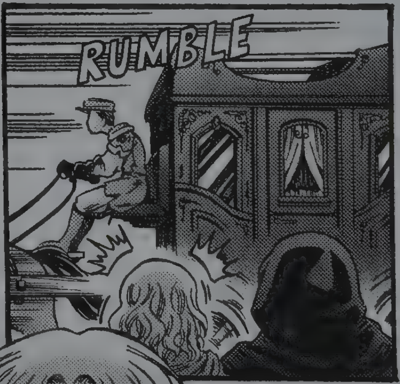
'Hey, that's mine!' Celsia cried, leaping ahead to grab at the shape. It was a dirty street urchin, who gave her a defiant look before biting a chunk out of the Golden Apple and twisting away.

They stood there, hapless, as the child ran off. He had already eaten half the apple, before vanishing into a tiny gap between two buildings.

'I wonder if it tastes good,' said Pylus.

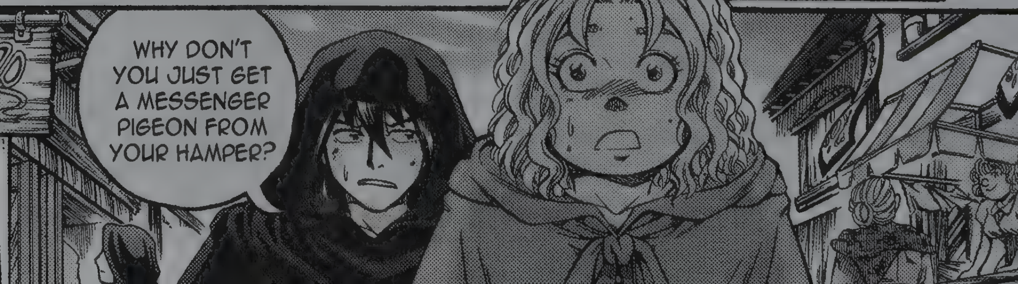
'I'm certain it tastes disgusting, appallingly bad!' Celsia snapped. 'After all, it was *only* worth my weight in gold!'

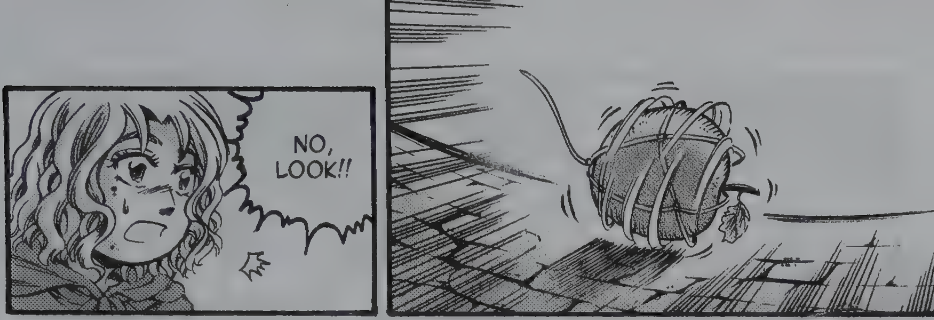
Reaching into her basket, she drew out yet another Golden Apple. She gave it a wistful look, and tied a new length of string around it with almost ceremonial solemnity.



'Last try,' she said as she let it drop. 'Apple, *take me to someone who can contact my stepmother*.'

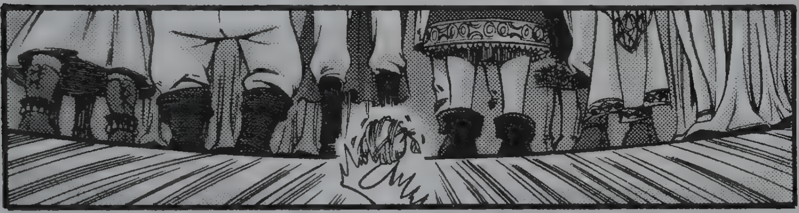
She let the apple roll ahead, where it spun towards an intersection. Just then, there was a burst of noise, as a rumbling coach drawn by speeding horses suddenly turned a corner. The coach sped past before she could even react. Unfortunately, she failed to pull the string back in time.


WHY DON'T YOU JUST GET A MESSENGER PIGEON FROM YOUR HAMPER?



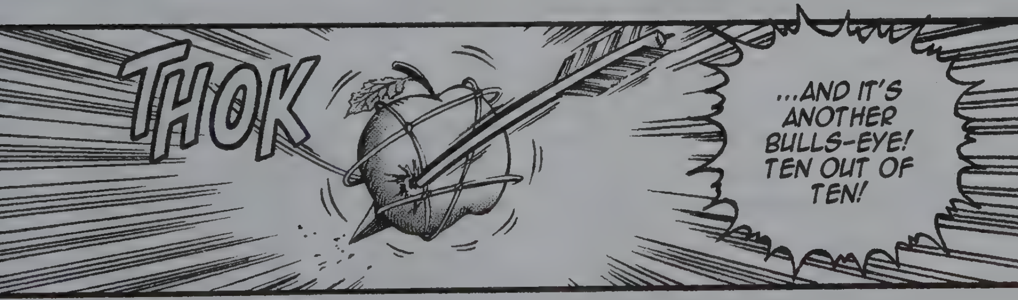
Celsia turned to Pylus. 'The coach didn't crush the apple! My string broke, but it's still moving! Quick, after it!'

The apple careened left and right, zig-zagging its way down the street. Freed from Celsia's restraints, its trajectory was now much wilder and harder to predict. Pylus and Celsia found themselves dodging horse-drawn wagons and peddler's stores, weaving their way through scores of townsfolk who craned their heads in confusion. Flashes of the rolling apple could be seen every now and then, vanishing and reappearing behind the boots and cloaks of the passing masses.

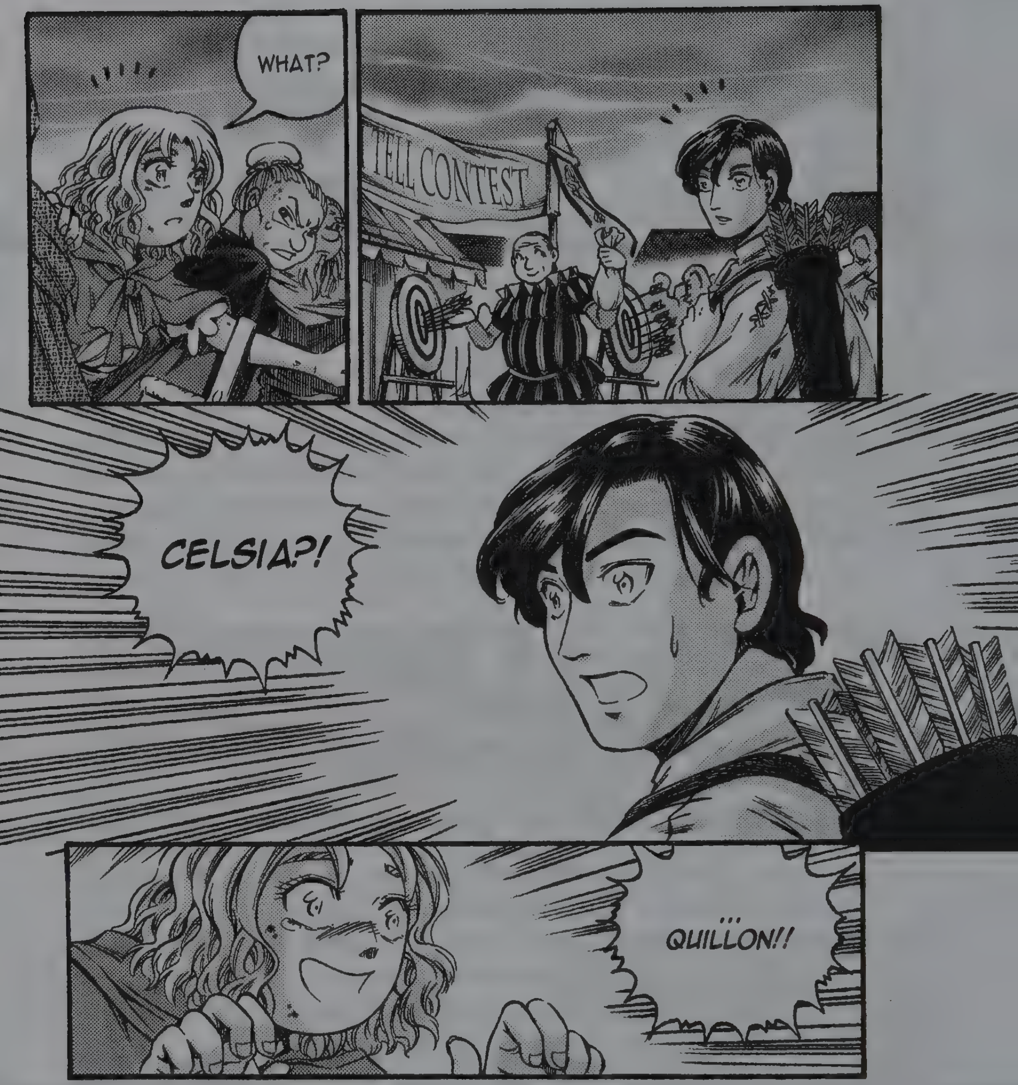


To her dismay, a crowd had gathered to watch some sort of festivity up ahead. The apple was quick to slip into this sea of legs, forcing Celsia to hurl herself at the cram of bodies. Elbowing her way though, she emerged on the other side to see a row of archery targets.

Just then, an arrow whistled through the air. Celsia gave a shriek, when she saw what it was about to hit.


THOK
...AND IT'S ANOTHER BULLS-EYE! TEN OUT OF TEN!

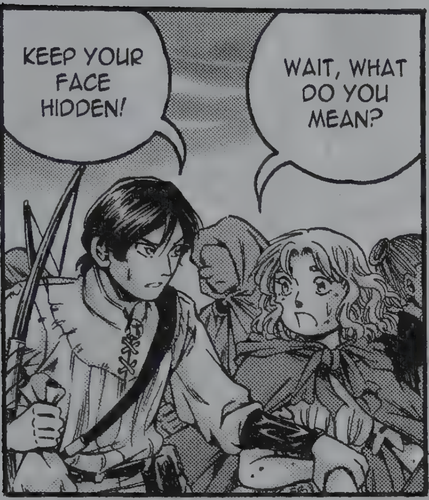
'Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you our winner, the best archer in our *William Tell* archery contest! His prize will be one hundred coppers. Congratulations, ***Quillon Drake***!'


WHAT?
TELL CONTEST
CELSIA?!
...QUILLON!!

They ran towards each other, each choking back tears of happiness. The two barely had time to embrace, before the announcer came forward to present Quillon his prize. The crowd surged forward in excitement, pressing in from all sides. The sudden stampede of boots crushed the Golden Apple, before Celsia could even think to retrieve it.

As soon as Quillon thanked the announcer for the bag of coins, he turned to leave. He ignored the fawning crowd completely, before grabbing Celsia by the hand and leading her aside.

'Come with me quickly,' he said in an urgent whisper. '*You're in grave danger*!'

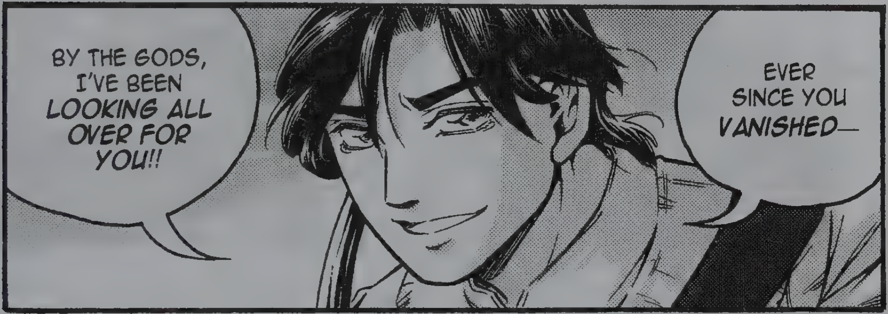

KEEP YOUR FACE HIDDEN!
WAIT, WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

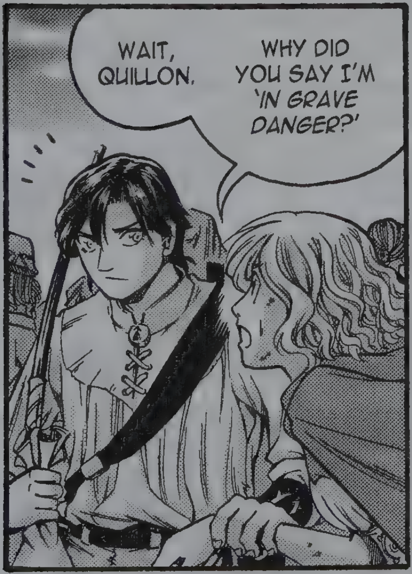
'Where's Grandmother and my stepmother, Quillon? Are they safe?'

Quillon didn't reply. His jaw was tightly clenched as he dodged the throng. Eventually, the crowd of festive seekers thinned.

'Don't worry. Your stepmother has discovered Healer Penny's whereabouts,' he eventually said. He has slowed his pace, though his voice remained low. 'She and my grandfather will go and retrieve her soon enough. All of them are safe. But *you...*'

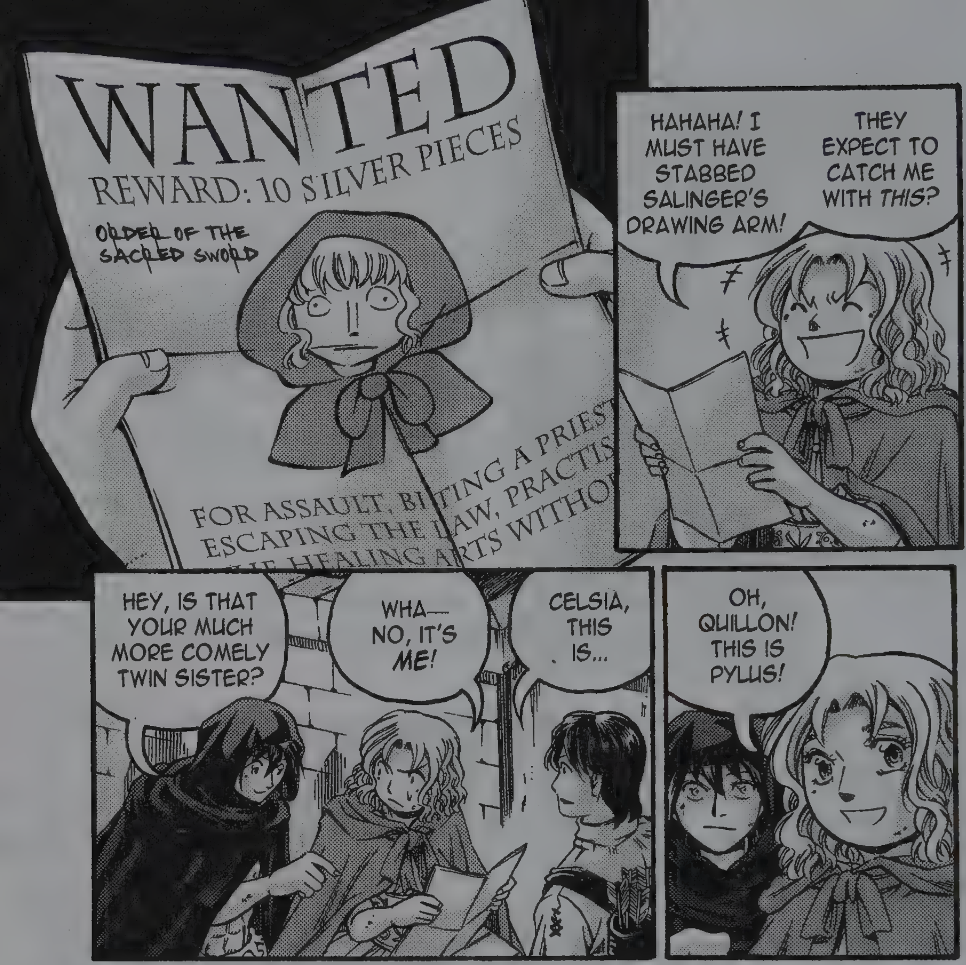
Quillon finally turned to face her. His eyes were soft, and brimming with tears of relief.


BY THE GODS, I'VE BEEN *LOOKING ALL OVER FOR YOU!!*
EVER SINCE YOU *VANISHED*—


WAIT, QUILLON.
WHY DID YOU SAY I'M *'IN GRAVE DANGER?'*

Quillon gave a quick nod, drawing Celsia into a quiet corner of the street. He fished a folded sheet of paper from his pouch and handed it to her.

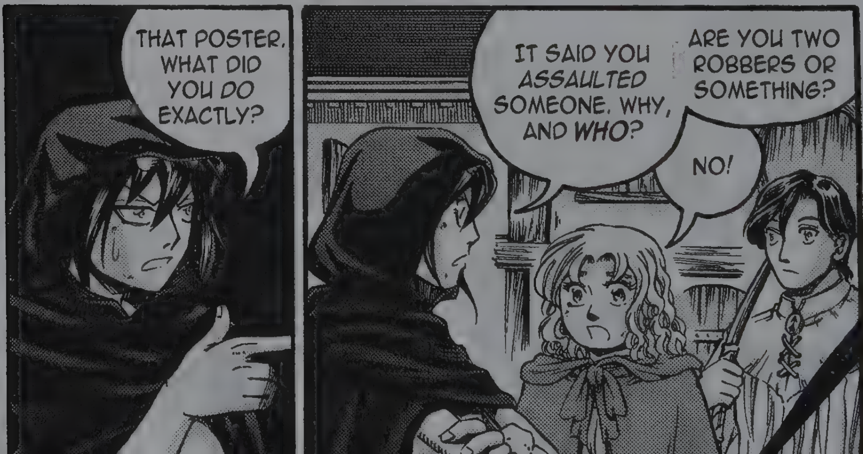
'These posters are everywhere. Not just in this town, but in other towns I've travelled through. They were all posted by *The Order of the Sacred Sword*. By ***Salinger***!'

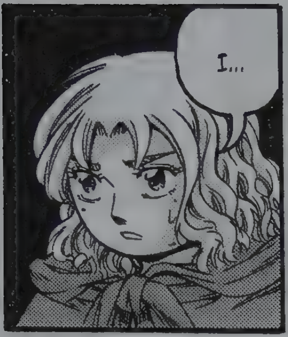

WANTED
REWARD: 10 SILVER PIECES
ORDER OF THE SACRED SWORD
FOR ASSAULT, BITING A PRIEST
ESCAPING THE LAW, PRACTIS
THE HEALING ARTS WITHO
HAHAHA! I MUST HAVE STABBED SALINGER'S DRAWING ARM!
THEY EXPECT TO CATCH ME WITH *THIS*?
HEY, IS THAT YOUR MUCH MORE COMELY TWIN SISTER?
WHA— NO, IT'S *ME*!
CELSIA, THIS IS...
OH, QUILLON! THIS IS PYLUS!

Celsia gave a brief rundown of her journey, taking care to leave out the less savoury parts. Quillon gave Pylus a friendly nod.

'Let's go back to the inn where I'm staying,' he said. 'Celsia, you should remove your red hood. We can buy a new cloak later.'

'Woah, wait!' There was a shade of suspicion in Pylus' voice.


THAT POSTER, WHAT DID YOU *DO* EXACTLY?
IT SAID YOU *ASSAULTED* SOMEONE. WHY, AND *WHO*?
ARE YOU TWO ROBBERS OR SOMETHING?
NO!



Celsia hesitated, unsure of how much to tell Pylus. She didn't want to lie, but like with Quillon, she also didn't want to reveal *too* many details about what happened. *What do fauns even think of werewolves?*

'I stabbed a priest,' she finally said.

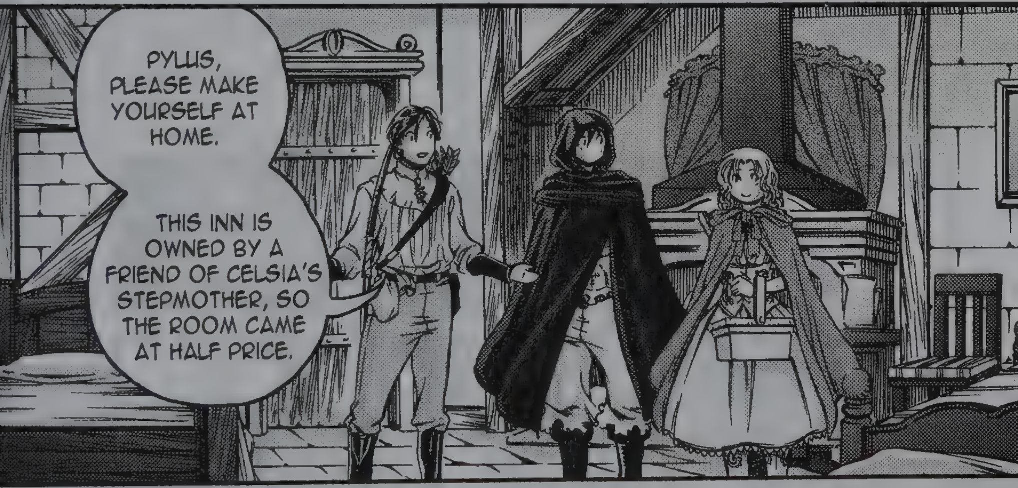
Pylus blinked. He reached out, wrapping his hands warmly around hers. 'I'm sure it was for perfectly understandable and completely acceptable reasons,' he said, giving her fingers a friendly squeeze. '*I* certainly have no complaints. Carry on!'

Celsia gaped. *Please don't tell me he's stabbed a priest too,* she thought. For all she knew about him, *he* could have been a robber.

'Come on! Let's head to the inn!' Pylus said cheerfully. 'There's nothing like a full meal and a soft bed. Lead the way, Quillon!'

With her mouth still hanging open, Celsia watched as Quillon lead an eager Pylus down the street. When they both turned to beckon to her, she gave a sigh. She had no choice but to follow.

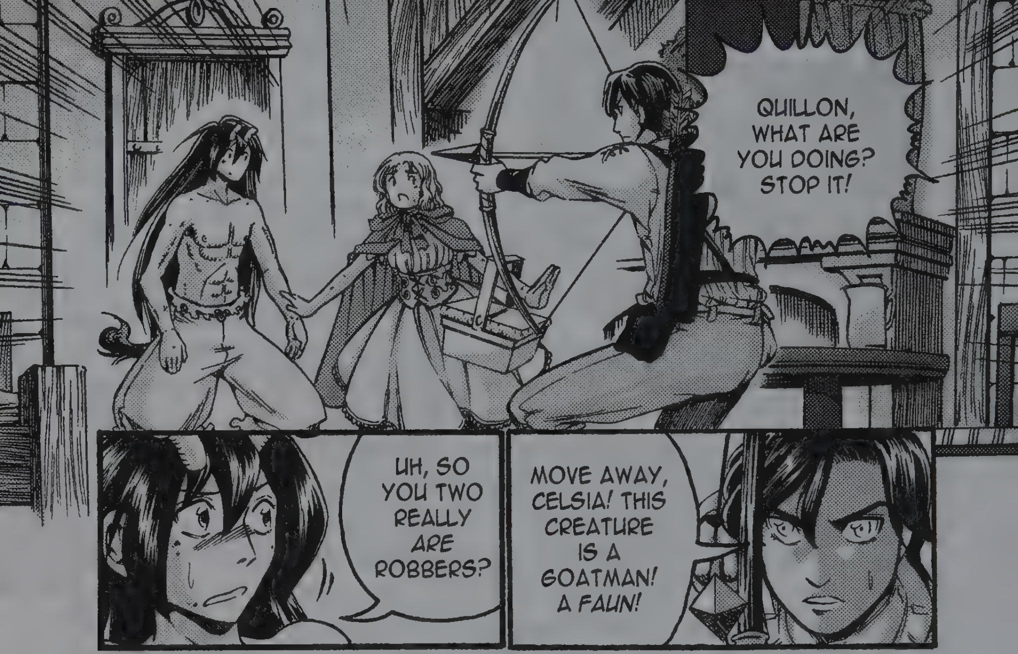
*****


PYLUS, PLEASE MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME.
THIS INN IS OWNED BY A FRIEND OF CELSIA'S STEPMOTHER, SO THE ROOM CAME AT HALF PRICE.

'I hope you will excuse the mess. I'd spent the entire week searching for Celsia, so I had little time to clean up.'

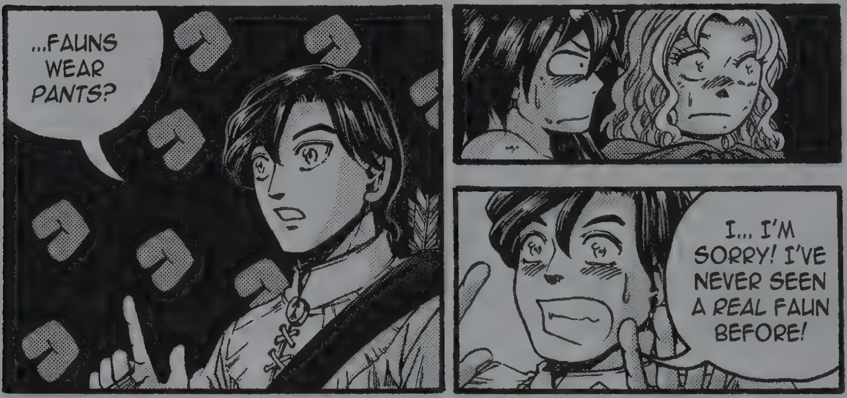
Pylus looked at the scrubbed floors and the neatly-straightened bedsheets, and shrugged. He started to unfurl his cloak, revealing his horns and his mass of dark hair. As soon as he kicked his boots off, Quillon tensed and took a step back.

'Celsia, get away from him!' Quillon suddenly shouted. Celsia turned, horrified by the scene unfolding in front of her.


QUILLON, WHAT ARE YOU DOING? STOP IT!
UH, SO YOU TWO REALLY ARE ROBBERS?
MOVE AWAY, CELSIA! THIS CREATURE IS A GOATMAN! A FAUN!

‘Quillon, he saved my life!’ Celsia cried. She threw herself directly in front of Quillon’s bow, shielding Pylus with her body. ‘I don’t know what you have against fauns, but I’ll not let you threaten him!’

Quillon slowly lowered his bow. The fear and wariness in his eyes faded, soon to be replaced by a quizzical look. Eventually, he raised an index finger and pointed it at Pylus.

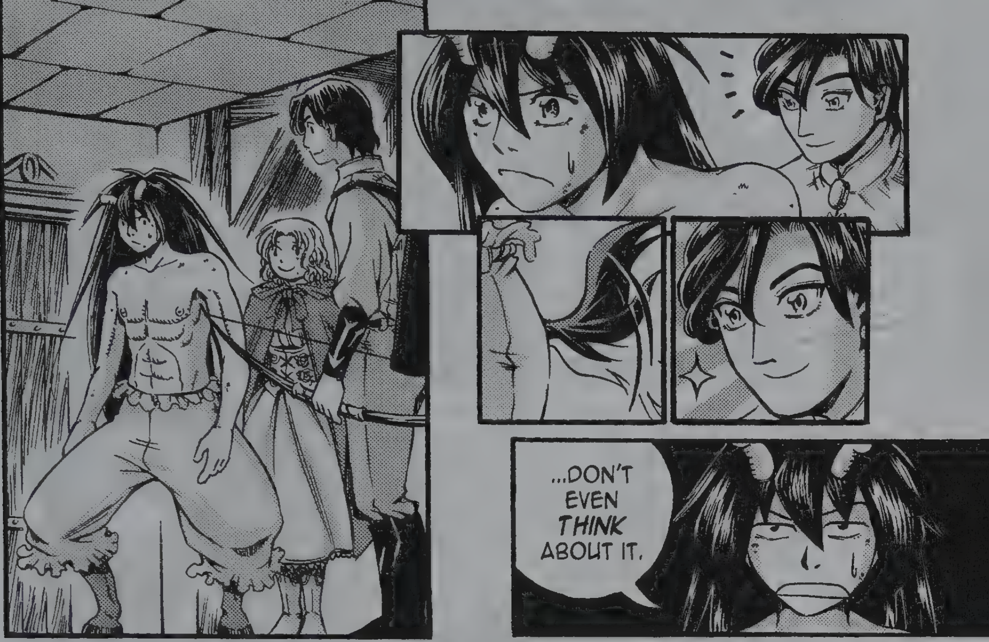

...FAUNS WEAR PANTS?
I... I'M SORRY! I'VE NEVER SEEN A REAL FAUN BEFORE!

‘I apologise for earlier. I was... simply very surprised. I didn’t...’

Celsia relaxed and gave Pylus a smile. ‘I think he’s just curious about you, Pylus. You should let Quillon... *study* you for a bit.’

‘What? *Why*?’ Pylus snapped. Annoyance marred his features, until he saw Celsia’s persistent smile. He groaned. ‘This *is* a robbery!’

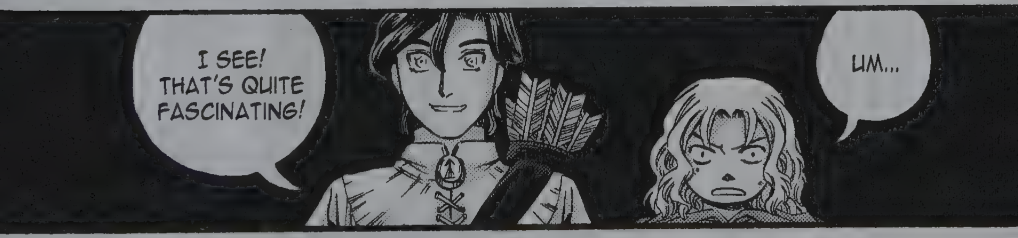
Scowling, Pylus awkwardly shuffled to the center of the room.


...DON'T EVEN *THINK* ABOUT IT.

'If you *must* know,' Pylus said, in a voice laced with irritation. 'I wear pants to protect my modesty from you humans.'

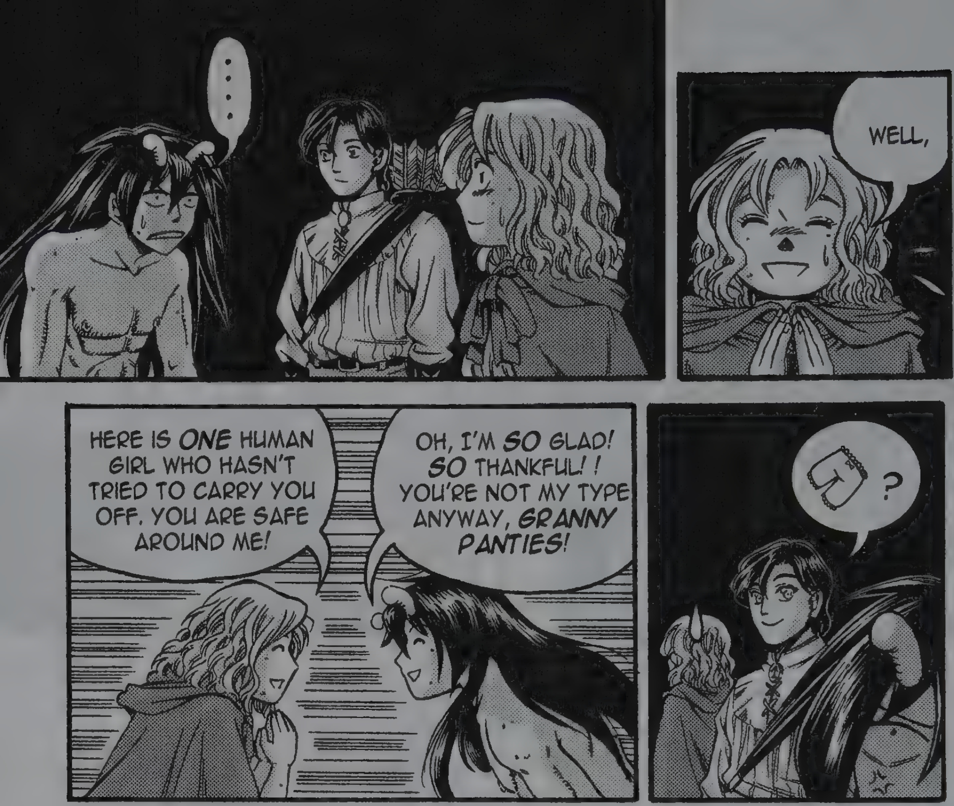
Quillon raised his eyebrows in genuine surprise. 'Modesty? But I thought that fauns carried human girls off for their drunken revelries. That's why I almost attacked you earlier. I believed you might... be a danger to Celsia. I'm sorry, but I was told that fauns were... *lewd*. So—”

'*Lewd?*' Pylus' voice raised an octave in disbelief. '*You* asked me why I'm wearing pants, and *I'm* lewd? Look, I don't deny or find fault with the 'drunken revelries' part, but you're mistaken. Lecherous human girls carrying off young, comely fauns have always been the greater danger, not the other way around. I know, because I've been beating off over-eager human girls with a stick all the way from here to the Corel Shores. Human girls have *ravenous* appetites.'


I SEE! THAT'S QUITE FASCINATING!
UM...

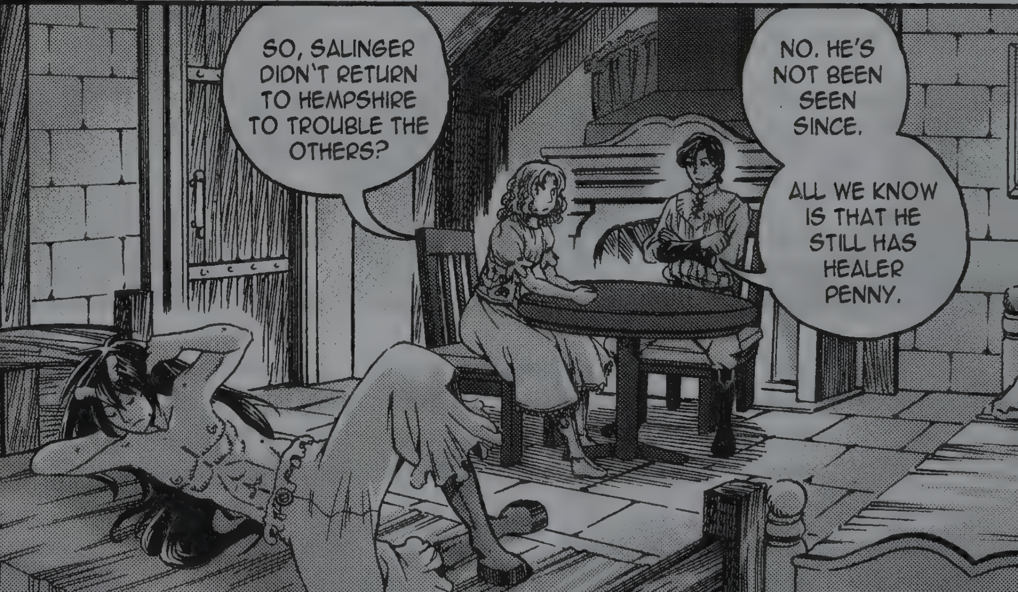
Pylus continued with a dramatic shake of his head. 'Some humans read a book or two on fauns, and fancy themselves an expert. So which Great Sage was it, who told you that fauns were *lewd*?'

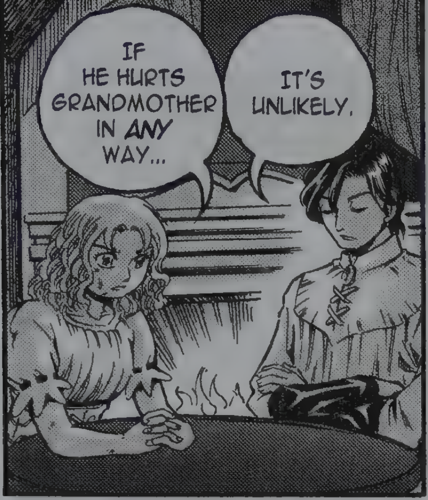
'It was... Celsia, actually.' Quillon replied cheerfully.


. . . .
WELL,
HERE IS ONE HUMAN GIRL WHO HASN'T TRIED TO CARRY YOU OFF. YOU ARE SAFE AROUND ME!
OH, I'M SO GLAD! SO THANKFUL! ! YOU'RE NOT MY TYPE ANYWAY, GRANNY PANTIES!
?

* * * * *

They spent the rest of the evening sitting by the fire and talking. Celsia told Quillon more about her adventures, but she was careful to omit the death of the Gingerbread Witch. As she talked, her eyes darted over to Pylus, but he seemed to take no interest in their chatter.


SO, SALINGER DIDN'T RETURN TO HEMPSHIRE TO TROUBLE THE OTHERS?
NO. HE'S NOT BEEN SEEN SINCE.
ALL WE KNOW IS THAT HE STILL HAS HEALER PENNY.


IF HE HURTS GRANDMOTHER IN *ANY* WAY...
IT'S UNLIKELY.

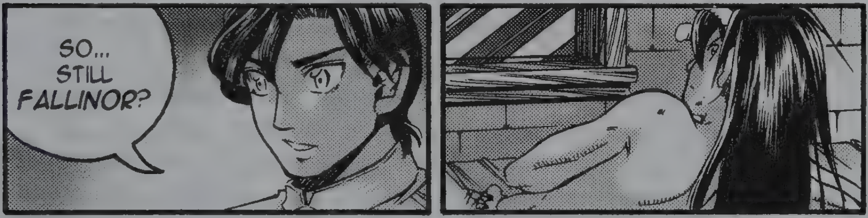
'When you vanished, I was certain you couldn't have gone very far,' Quillon continued. 'Your stepmother tasked me to find you, while she and my grandfather tracked Salinger's movements. They are in Reversby right now, and we have been communicating by raven.' At this point, Quillon smiled. 'The ravens will be bringing them good news on the morrow.'

'I see.' Celsia said. 'Stepmother has many friends outside of Reversby and Silversby. If she and Elder Drake are confident that Grandmother is safe, then I shall entrust finding Grandmother to them.'

'A better question,' said Quillon, 'is where *you'll* be going now.'

Celsia fixed him with a look. Her eyes glowed with determination.

'Quillon, I made a promise to Grandmother. With Salinger putting a price on my head, I can only go forward, not backwards.'

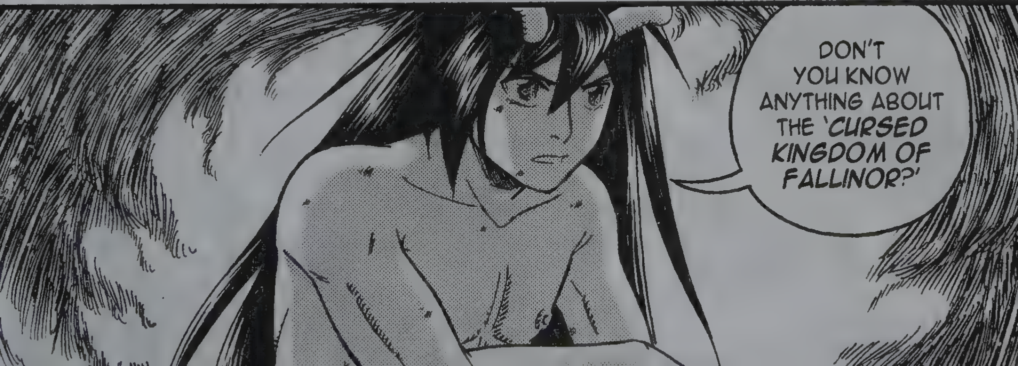

SO... STILL *FALLINOR?*

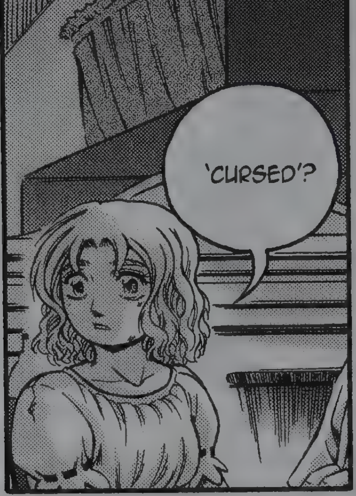
Celsia gave a solemn nod. 'I made my decision the day Grandmother was taken away. I must get to Fallinor, even if... I don't know what I'm supposed to do there.'

Find my true born grandmothers, the two queens? Then what?

'Why do you want to go to Fallinor?'

The voice came from the other side of the room, and the two turned in their seats. Pylus was sitting up in bed, facing them.


DON'T YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE '*CURSED KINGDOM OF FALLINOR?*'

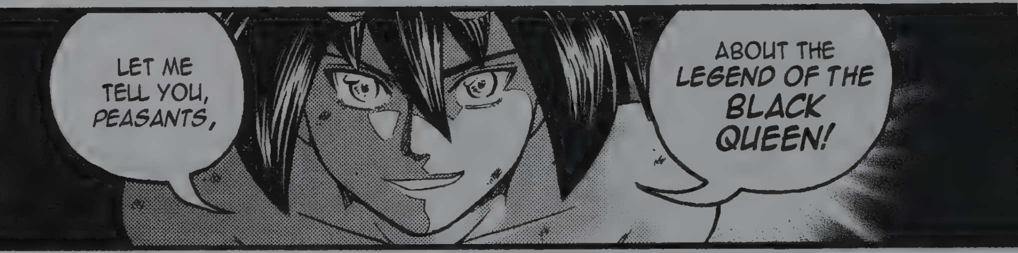


'I've only heard of it being referred to as the '*Fabled Kingdom*,' not the '*Cursed Kingdom*,' said Celsia. 'Wasn't it destroyed years ago?'

'*Destroyed*?' Pylus gave a derisive snort. 'Worse. Fallinor is a kingdom of *death*. Had it been merely destroyed, there would be nothing to fear.'

'What happened to it?'

Pylus took a deep breath. He then leaned forward with a gleam in his eyes.

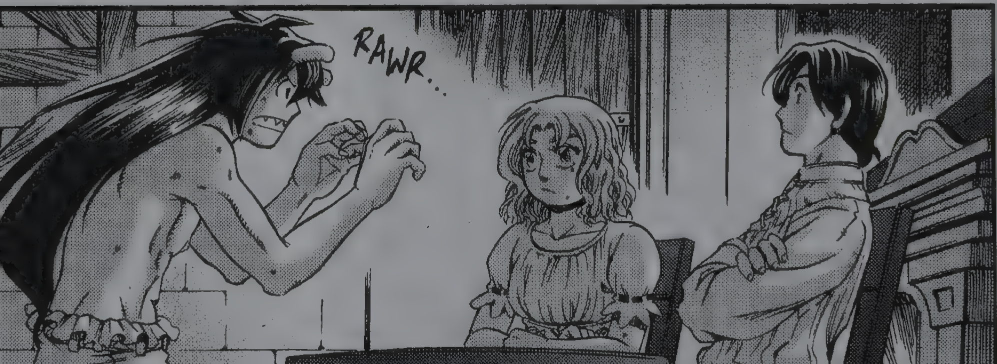

LET ME TELL YOU, PEASANTS,
ABOUT THE LEGEND OF THE BLACK QUEEN!

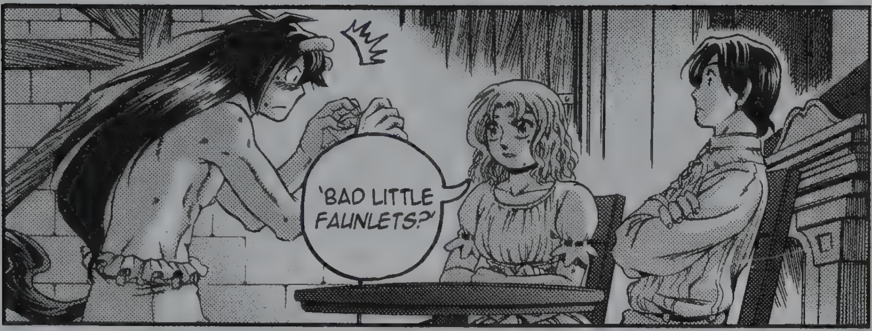
The Black Queen? Celsia's mind made the instant connection, but Pylus cut it short with a dramatic wave of his hands.

'Sixty years ago, the kingdom of Fallinor was ruled by an evil Witch-Queen, who wanted to cover the world in darkness. She marshalled a huge army, and attacked the neighbouring kingdom of Westerwick. This event was called ***'The March of the Black Queen.'***

'The Princes of Westerwick rose up, joining forces with the King of Anatolia to defy her. They beat her back, and then marched their armies into Fallinor to pursue her. However, on the brink of defeat, the Queen cast a curse, causing all the inhabitants of the kingdom to fall into an eternal sleep. Thus, the princes and the king died too, sacrificing themselves to save their own kingdoms.'

'However, the Black Queen still lives. It is said that her restless spirit still roams the land, to *carry bad little faunlets off into the night*!'

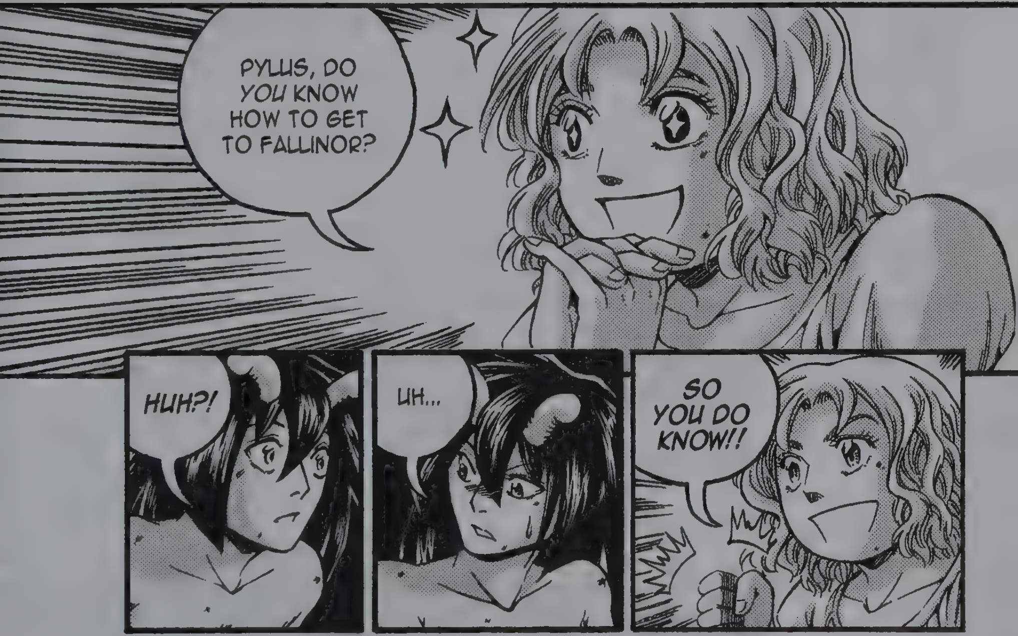



'BAD LITTLE FAUNLETS?'

'That sounded like a bedtime tale to scare... bad little *faunlets*.'

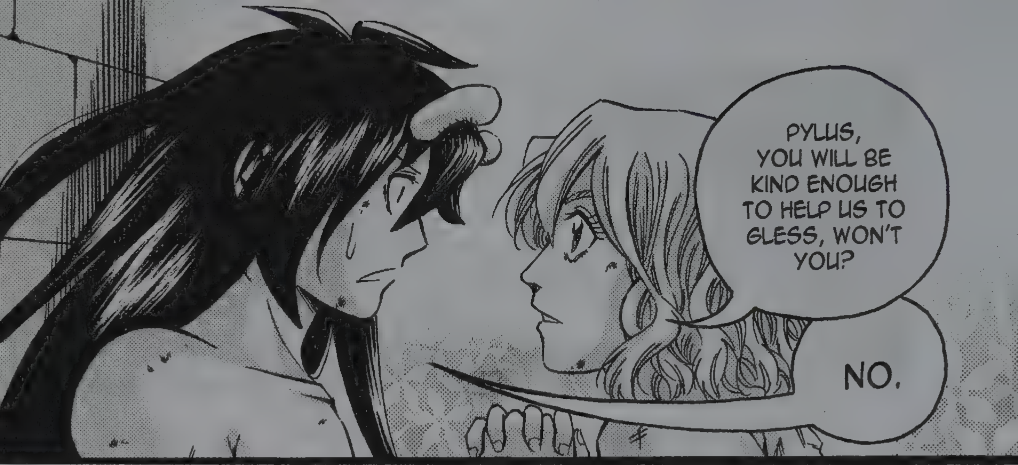
Pylus flushed scarlet. 'Fine! I warned you! Fallinor *is* a cursed kindgom, and anyone who knows anything of it will agree!'

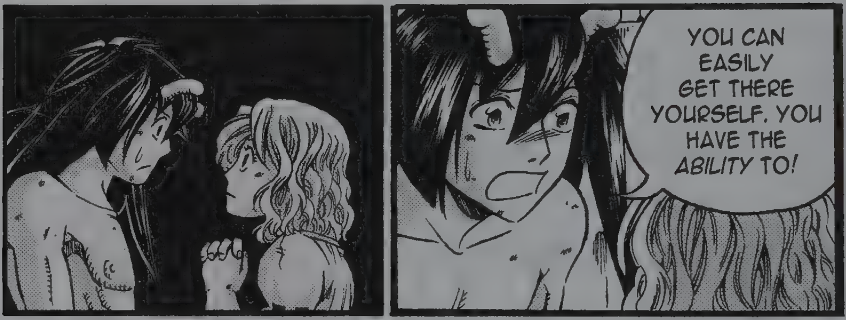
Celsia watched Pylus stomp off in a huff. She was fascinated; she had managed to extract very little personal information from him in the brief time they've spent together, so getting a glimpse into the tales of his childhood was a revelation. If fauns were told detailed stories of Fallinor and its downfall, *it could mean...*


PYLUS, DO YOU KNOW HOW TO GET TO FALLINOR?
HUH?!
UH...
SO YOU DO KNOW!!

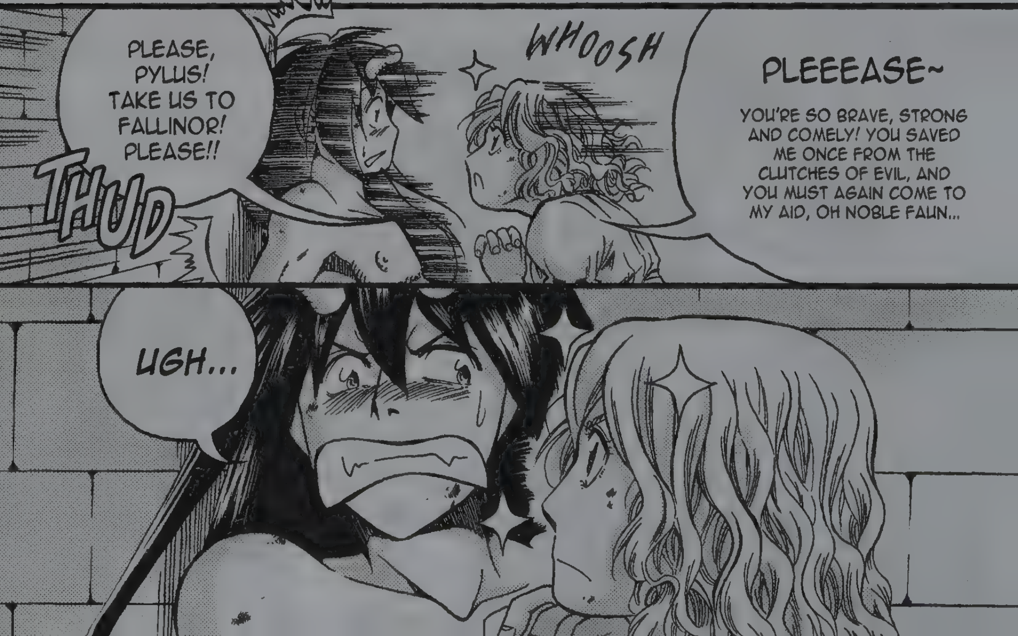
'*Tell me how to get to Fallinor!*'

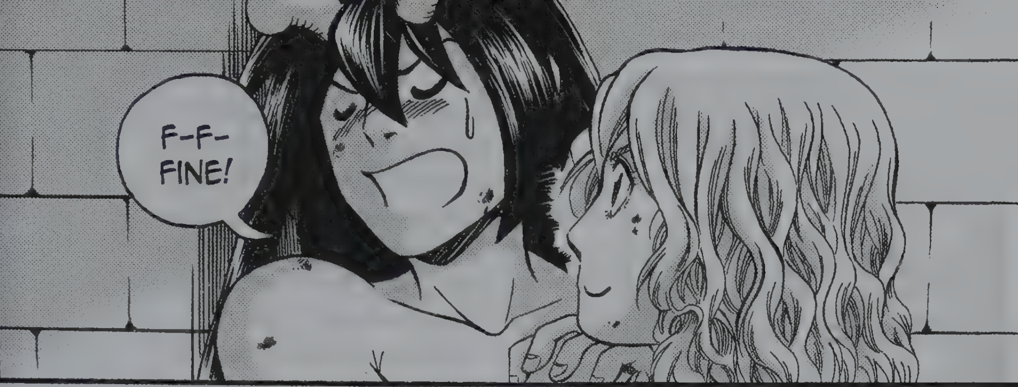
'It's, uh, north of the Crescent Ranges. Near a place called Gless.' The moment the words tumbled out, Pylus' eyes grew as wide as saucers. He retreated when Celsia started to advance on him, her big eyes shining, until his back was pressed against the wall of the inn.


PYLUS, YOU WILL BE KIND ENOUGH TO HELP US TO GLESS, WON'T YOU?
NO.


YOU CAN EASILY GET THERE YOURSELF. YOU HAVE THE *ABILITY* TO!

Before Celsia could say another word, Pylus quickly slipped out from between her and the wall. He was like a brown blur, his hair streaking behind him as he headed for the safety of the other side of the room. Celsia, however, was faster. Her nose was once again inches away from his, and moving forwards.

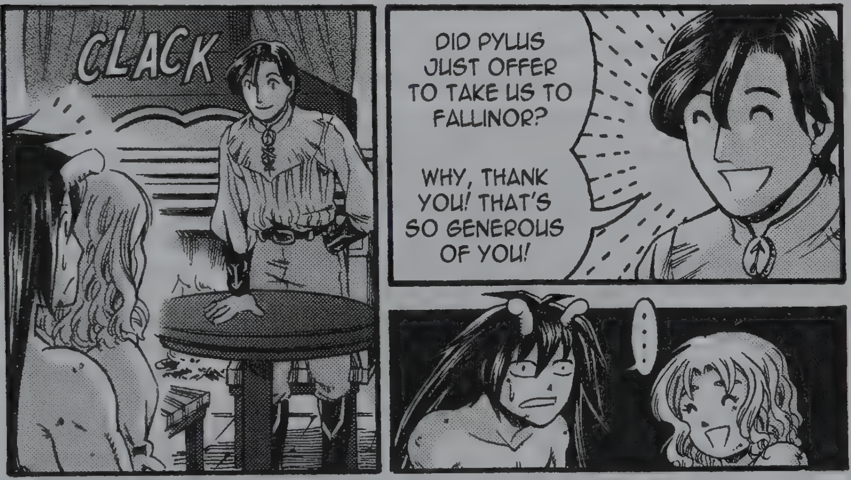

PLEASE, PYLUS! TAKE US TO FALLINOR! PLEASE!!
THUD
WHOOSH
PLEEEASE~
YOU'RE SO BRAVE, STRONG AND COMELY! YOU SAVED ME ONCE FROM THE CLUTCHES OF EVIL, AND YOU MUST AGAIN COME TO MY AID, OH NOBLE FAUN...
UGH...



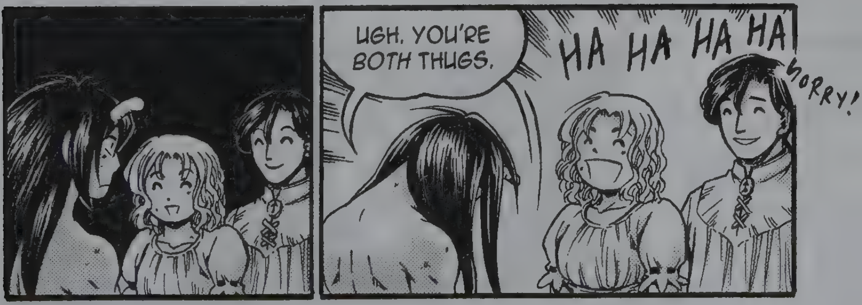
'But I'm only taking you as far as the border!' Pylus snapped. He shook his fist at her in a hapless manner. 'You... you... *thug*.'

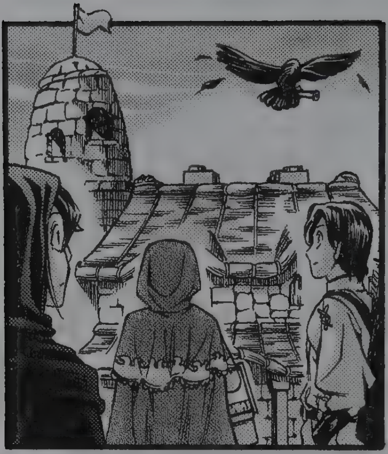
Celsia nodded happily and thanked Pylus, going so far as to give him a coquettish curtsey. He reacted by muttering a stream of threats and curses under his breath, which she ignored.

Good. I've wasted enough Golden Apples already.


CLACK
DID PYLUS JUST OFFER TO TAKE US TO FALLINOR?
WHY, THANK YOU! THAT'S SO GENEROUS OF YOU!
...

'We'll leave on the morrow,' said Celsia with another sweet smile. 'It's late in the evening, so it's time for a *bath*!'


UGH. YOU'RE BOTH THUGS.
HA HA HA HA
SORRY!



They rose early the next morning, to send a message at the local rookery. Celsia watched the flutter of black wings, as the raven flew off to deliver her letter to Bree in Reversby.

'So they use messenger ravens instead of pigeons here,' she said.

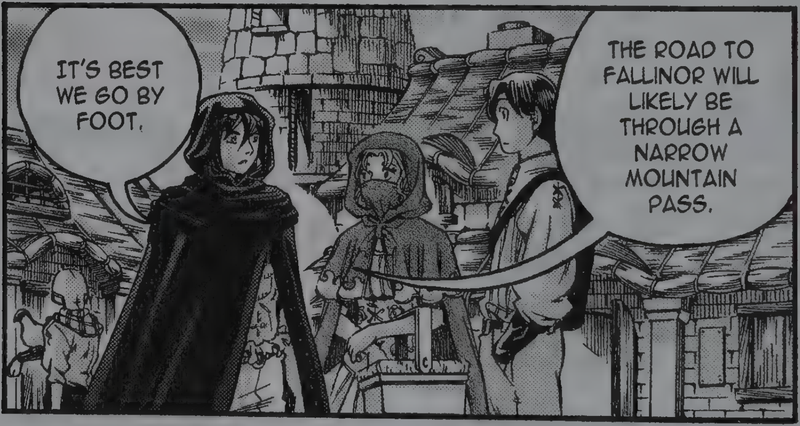
'Yes,' Quillon replied. 'Thromsby is part of a chain of towns and villages close to the Crescent Ranges, where Blue-winged Falcons live. These birds prey on pigeons, so they use ravens instead.'

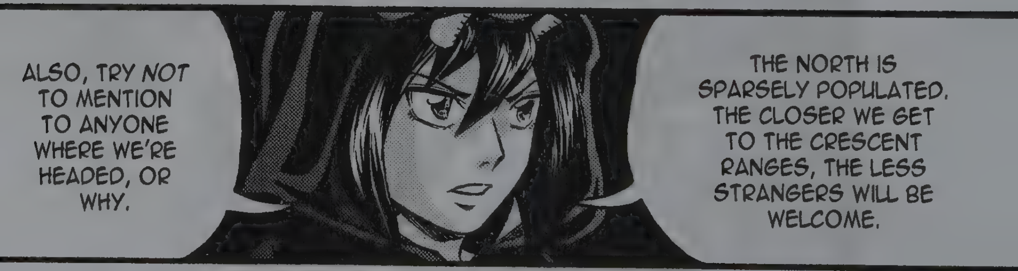
After the raven left, the two turned to look expectantly at Pylus.

'Where to, Pylus?' Quillon asked. 'By foot, or horse? I already have a mount, but we can purchase another with the coin I won yesterday.'

Quillon was referring to Dexter, the grey-and-white pony he had ridden from Hempshire. They had left Dexter back at the inn, where he stood in the stables, munching contentedly on his morning hay.

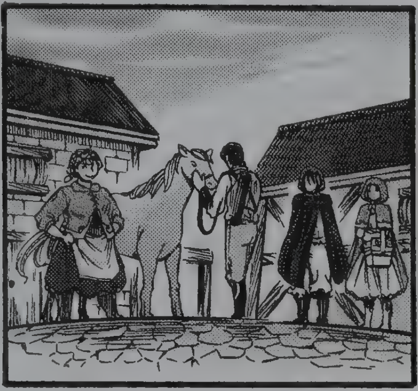
Pylus sighed. 'North. I've never been to Gless before, but I've heard that it's at the foot of the Crescent Ranges. However...'


IT'S BEST WE GO BY FOOT.
THE ROAD TO FALLINOR WILL LIKELY BE THROUGH A NARROW MOUNTAIN PASS.

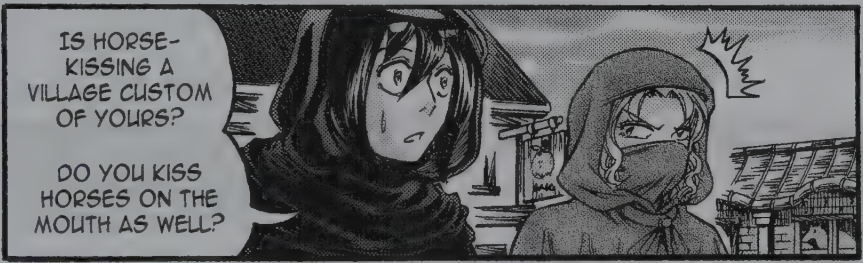

ALSO, TRY *NOT* TO MENTION TO ANYONE WHERE WE'RE HEADED, OR WHY.
THE NORTH IS SPARSELY POPULATED. THE CLOSER WE GET TO THE CRESCENT RANGES, THE LESS STRANGERS WILL BE WELCOME.

Celsia nodded. Even if there was no truth to Pylus' bedtime story, fallen kingdoms of any kind were often a source of superstition to simple village folk. Quillon, on the other hand, seemed to suffer more from the loss of Dexter, though he didn't complain.

'Mountains are no place for a pony,' he said, his hand hesitant as he handed Dexter's reins over to the owner of the inn. She was a large, jovial lady with ringlets of red hair peeking out from under her headscarf, who reminded Celsia of Bree. Her eyes lit up when Quillon handed her a bag of coins, asking her to send the pony to *The Trading Oak* in Loguetown.



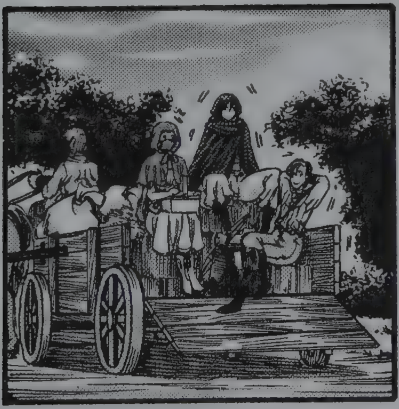
They watched Quillon say goodbye to Dexter, his hands ruffling the thick white mane. The pony nuzzled him affectionately, and Quillon responded with a peck onto the pony's nose.


IS HORSE-KISSING A VILLAGE CUSTOM OF YOURS?
DO YOU KISS HORSES ON THE MOUTH AS WELL?

Celsia aimed a swift kick at his haunches. 'Do *you*?!'

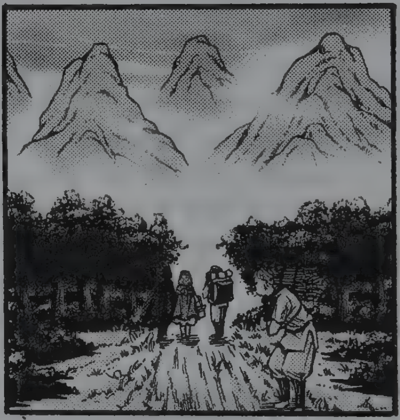
'*Ow*! What was that for? It was a serious question!'

They had little trouble finding a wagon heading north. There were a steady stream of travellers leaving from the northern gates of Thromsby, and more often than not, people preferred to cluster in groups. A promise of a coin or two was enough to persuade the average farmer to let them hitch a ride.



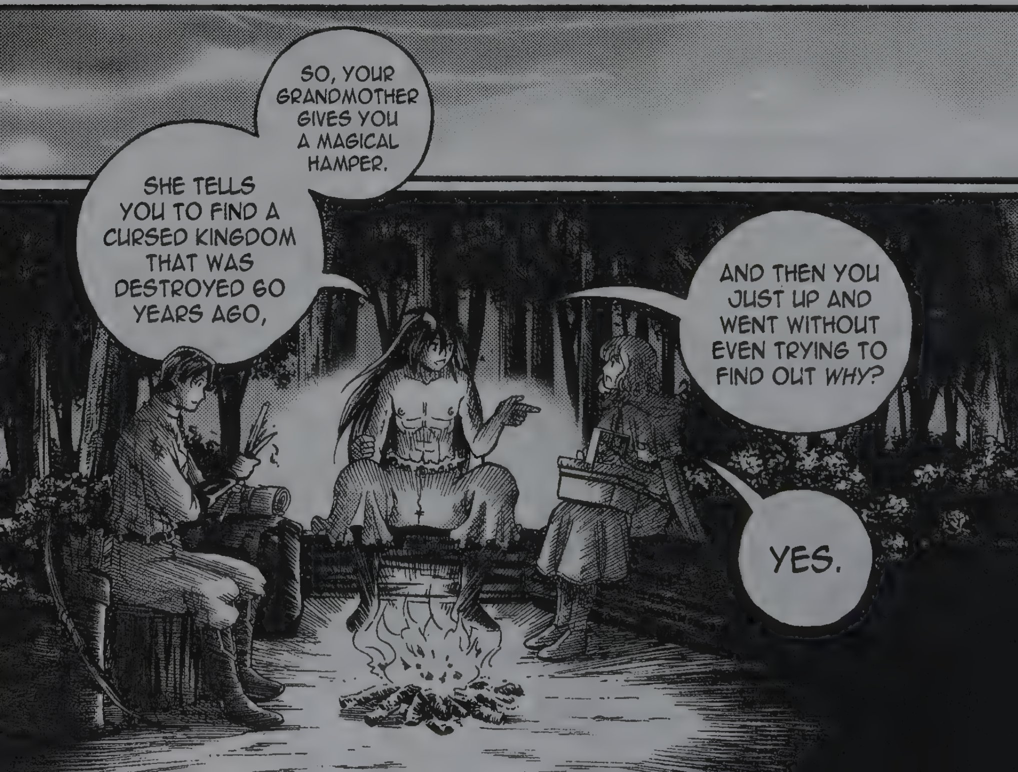
However, as they went further north, the travellers thinned. Soon, the roads became winding little dirt paths overgrown with weeds.

'We should be nearing Gless,' Pylus said a few days later, as they passed a man with a pile of branches tied to his back. The man was bent double by his burden, but his eyes still narrowed suspiciously as he turned around to watch them. Three strangers on foot in these parts seemed to arouse no lack of gawking villagers, especially at the smaller inns and taverns. Luckily, Celsia's hamper provided ample food and camping gear for sleeping out in the open, if need be.

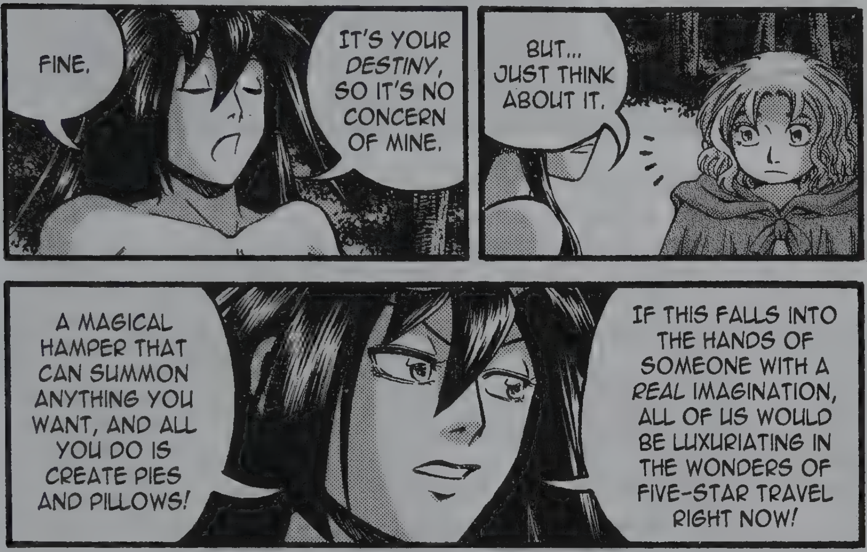


A chill blew past, and Celsia drew her long brown cape closer. She had traded her red hood for a less conspicuous one before they left Thromsby, and she was glad. The looming shapes of the Crescent Ranges grew larger by the day, and she knew that they were close. Gless was at the base of a steep cliff, and soon, they would have to scale the jagged fingers of the mountain's peaks to get to where she wanted.

* * * * *


SO, YOUR GRANDMOTHER GIVES YOU A MAGICAL HAMPER.
SHE TELLS YOU TO FIND A CURSED KINGDOM THAT WAS DESTROYED 60 YEARS AGO,
AND THEN YOU JUST UP AND WENT WITHOUT EVEN TRYING TO FIND OUT *WHY?*
YES.

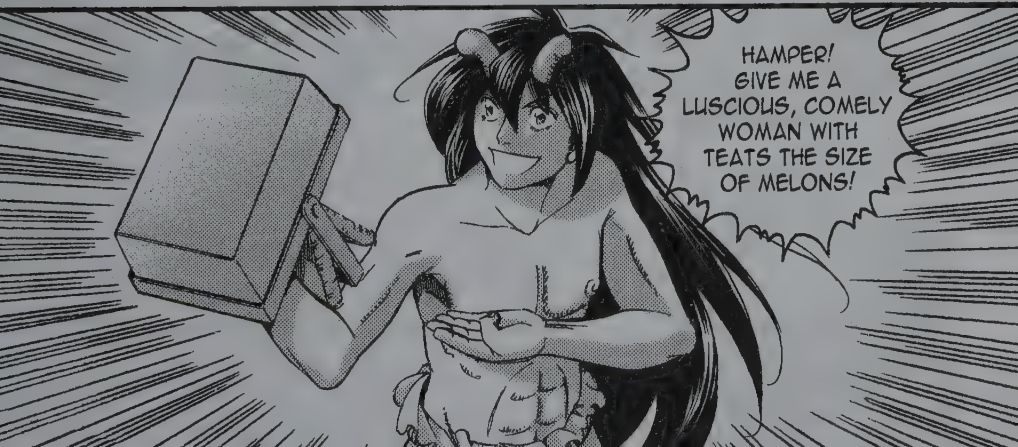
‘Look, I don’t doubt my grandmother has my best interests at heart!’ Celsia said, a little too defensively. ‘I’ll not have you make fun of what Grandmother Penny asked me to do! It’s not as if this hamper isn’t a compelling enough reason already!’

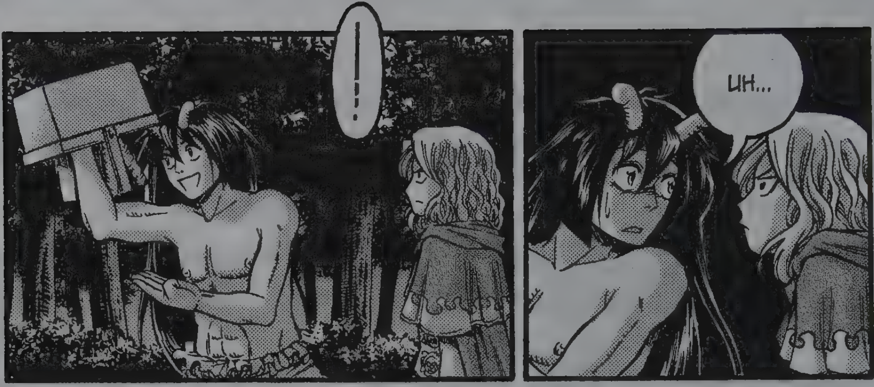

FINE.
IT'S YOUR DESTINY, SO IT'S NO CONCERN OF MINE.
BUT... JUST THINK ABOUT IT.
A MAGICAL HAMPER THAT CAN SUMMON ANYTHING YOU WANT, AND ALL YOU DO IS CREATE PIES AND PILLOWS!
IF THIS FALLS INTO THE HANDS OF SOMEONE WITH A *REAL* IMAGINATION, ALL OF US WOULD BE LUXURIATING IN THE WONDERS OF FIVE-STAR TRAVEL RIGHT NOW!

Celsia gave him a knowing smile. ‘Then why don’t you show off your *bountiful* imagination, Pylus? Here, I’ll lend you my hamper for a while. Dazzle me with what you can bring forth from its loins!’

‘Really?’ Pylus leapt to his hoofs, so eager he almost kicked a flaming log into Quillon’s face. Quillon just shook his head with an amused sigh. Surprisingly, he had taken the news of Celsia’s magical hamper in stride, showing neither much interest nor astonishment. ‘Healer Penny is most mysterious in her ways,’ was all he said.

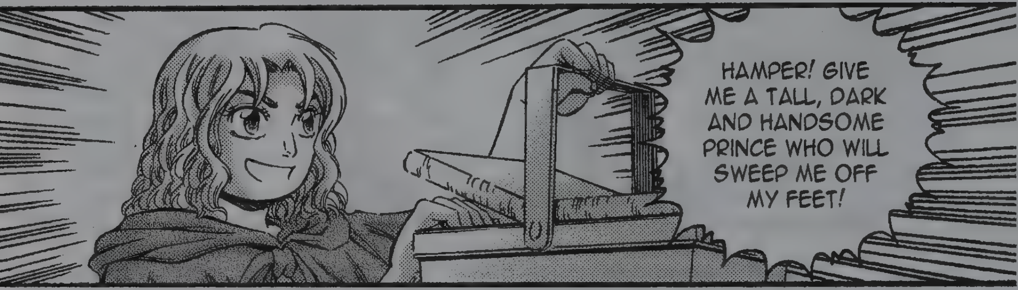
Pylus grabbed the hamper from Celsia. Thrusting his hand into it, he lifted it upside-down into the air as if it was a bejewelled glove.


HAMPER! GIVE ME A LUSCIOUS, COMELY WOMAN WITH TEATS THE SIZE OF MELONS!

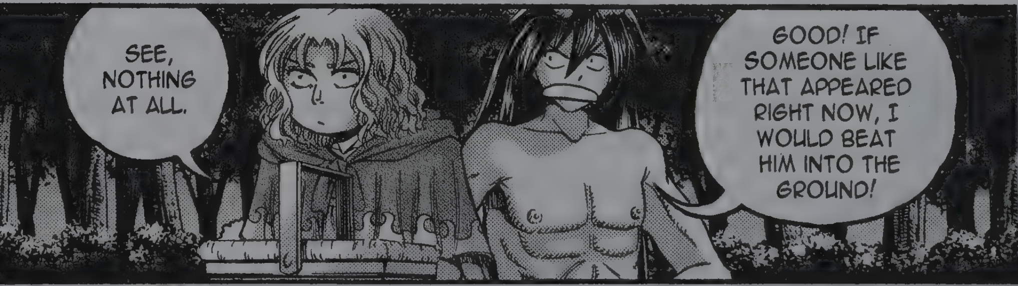


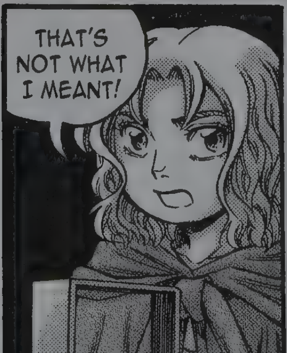
'Well, you *did* ask me to use my bountiful imagination to bring forth something from my loins.'

Celsia snatched the hamper back from Pylus. Lifting it up, she loudly proclaimed her own wish.


HAMPER! GIVE ME A TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME PRINCE WHO WILL SWEEP ME OFF MY FEET!

Nothing happened. Crickets chirped, the campfire crackled, and Quillon sat there quietly, ignoring them both. He was sharpening a branch with a knife, turning it into an arrow shaft.


GOOD! IF SOMEONE LIKE THAT APPEARED RIGHT NOW, I WOULD BEAT HIM INTO THE GROUND!
SEE, NOTHING AT ALL.


THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT!

'Firstly, only *I* can use the hamper. Secondly, I can't create living things from it, though it can summon plants.' Celsia said, sitting back down with the hamper nesting in the crook of her arm. 'There must be other rules and limitations too.'

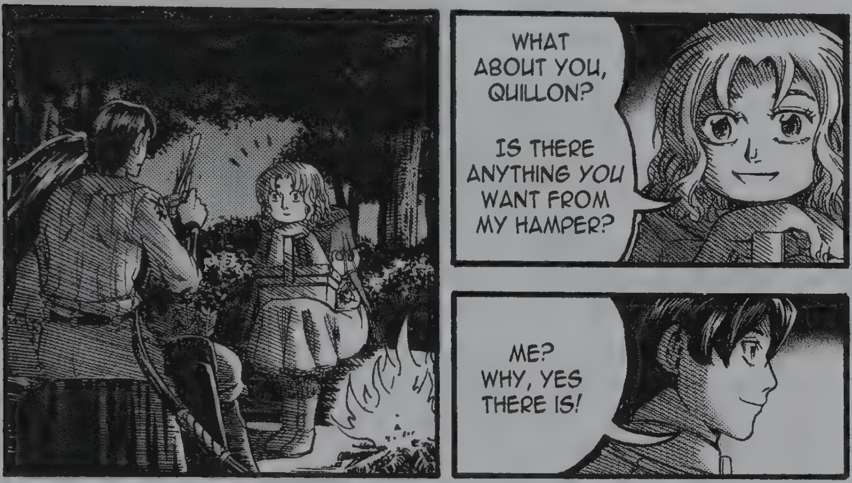
'Yes, there must be! And that is just *so* interesting to me!'

Pylus threw his hands into the air, dropping himself down onto a log by the fire. 'This is like walking into a candy store, only to find unbreakable glass at every turn. Yet another example of why everyone gets to have more fun than me.'

'It's not like that at all,' Celsia said in exasperation. 'My grandmother told me to use the basket to just create simple things, and only if I had a *real* need. You would think there must be some reason for that, seeing that she kept the secret of it from me for so many years!'

'True. But you *clearly* still get to have more fun than me.'

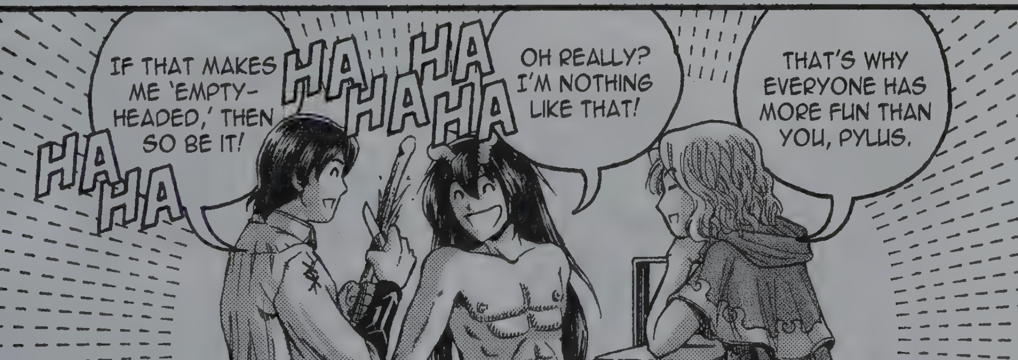
Celsia just sighed, rolling her eyes.


WHAT ABOUT YOU, QUILLON?
IS THERE ANYTHING *YOU* WANT FROM MY HAMPER?
ME? WHY, YES THERE IS!

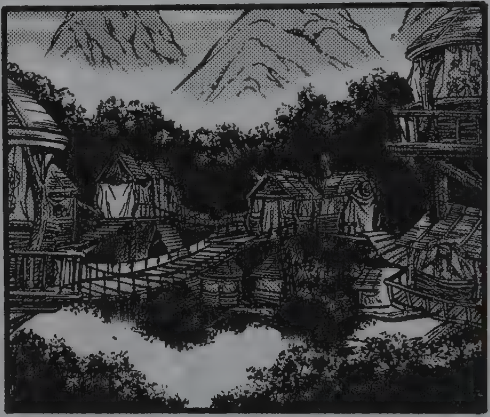
Quillon showed them the arrow shafts he had been carving. 'Some feathers and arrowheads for these would be helpful.'

'It must be nice to be so empty-headed and devoid of desire,' Pylus said, before Celsia silenced him with another kick at his hoofs. It was true that Quillon could appear simple-minded to more sophisticated townsfolk, but she would not allow anyone to make fun of him.

Quillon shrugged off the comment with a smile. 'It's true I'm don't have many needs, but I think that's a gift. I enjoy simple pleasures.'


IF THAT MAKES ME 'EMPTY-HEADED,' THEN SO BE IT!
HA HA
HA HA HA HA
OH REALLY? I'M NOTHING LIKE THAT!
THAT'S WHY EVERYONE HAS MORE FUN THAN YOU, PYLUS.

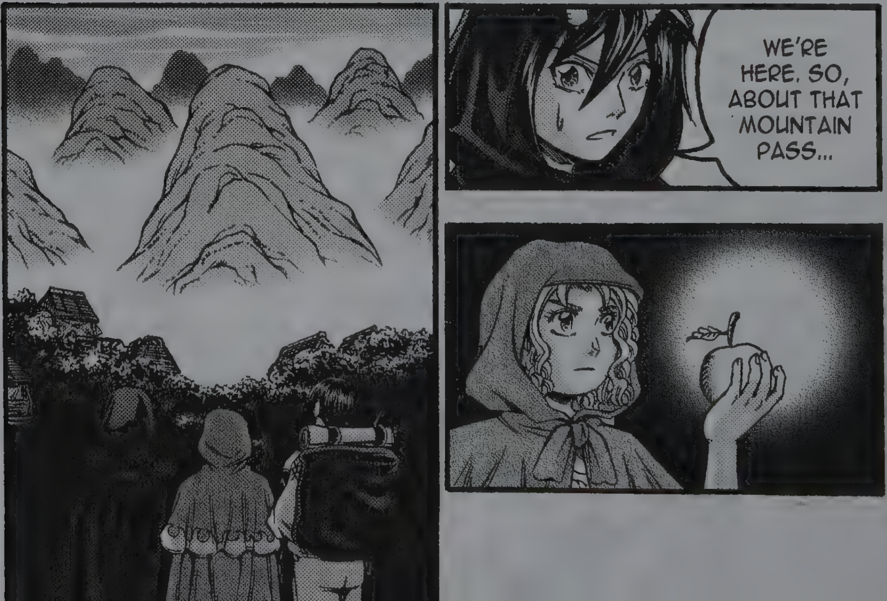
They set off early the next morning. The pace was leisurely, as they traced the narrow, weed-choked path snaking through the forest. Within a few hours, they started to notice a chill settling in. Tufts of thick white fog had appeared, shrouding the surrounding trees like wads of cotton. It grew even thicker as they walked, until a sudden gust of wind revealed a startling scene.



'Look!' Celsia said, pointing. 'Are those... houses? *Tree*-houses?'

'Yes, they are.' Pylus' eyes narrowed, as he surveyed the scene before them. 'I have heard that the people of Gless lived in trees, collecting herbs that grew only in the rarer stretches of the Crescent Ranges. Either way, given the nature of their trade, they are unlikely to be friendly to outsiders.'

The wooden tree-houses of Gless stood a good twenty feet off the ground, connected by a labyrinth network of rope bridges and wooden walkways. The thatched roofs of the houses peered out from amidst the thick green foliage, giving off a faint yellow sheen in the morning sun. This was in stark contrast to the looming wall of rock in the background—the massive Crescent Ranges, which appeared to extend for miles in both directions.


WE'RE HERE. SO, ABOUT THAT MOUNTAIN PASS...

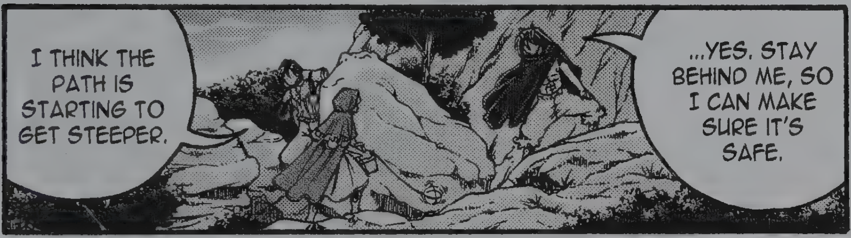
'Golden Apple, find me a safe path through the Crescent Ranges that will lead us to Fallinor!'

Celsia tied the string to the Golden Apple, and let it drop. To her surprise, the apple immediately started rolling forwards like an eager sniffer dog following a scent.

'Look!' Celsia said to Pylus and Quillon. 'If the apple's moving, it means that a safe mountain pass to Fallinor really *does* exist!'

The other two followed in silence. Quillon had an amused smile on his face, and he soon started bantering with Celsia on the magical powers of this mysterious apple. Pylus, on the other hand, remained tight-lipped and tense. He looked as if a veiled assassin might leap out from the fog to attack him at any moment.

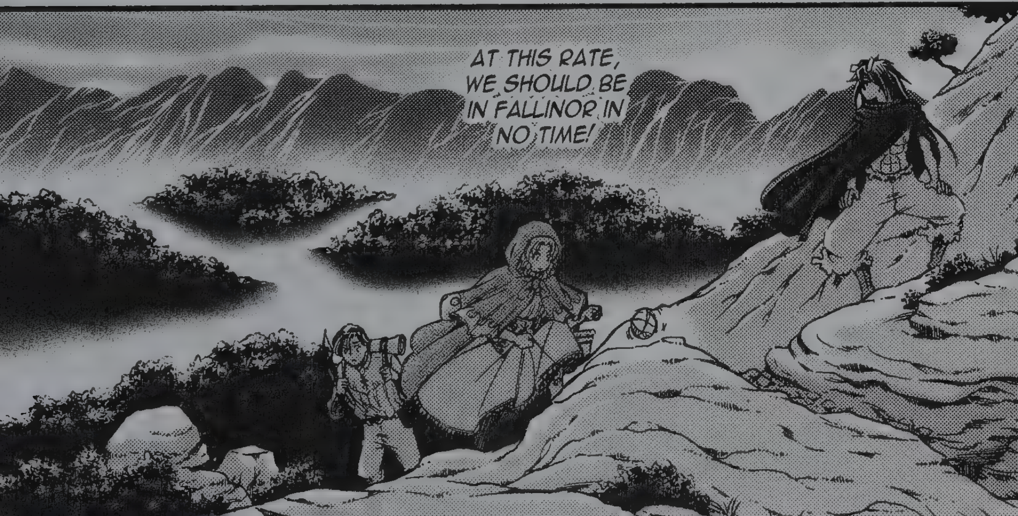
Within half an hour, they were scaling the rocky foothills.

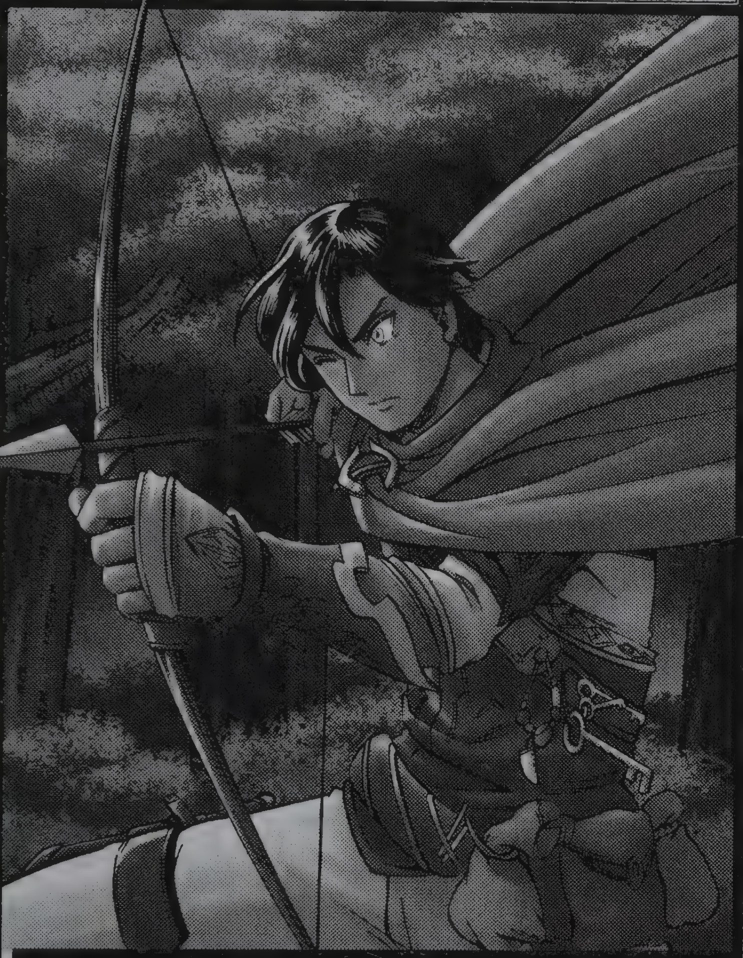

...YES. STAY BEHIND ME, SO I CAN MAKE SURE IT'S SAFE.
I THINK THE PATH IS STARTING TO GET STEEPER.

Celsia watched as Pylus hopped lightly onto a ledge that was as high as her head. His hoofs seemed to naturally find grooves in the rock, though she also noted that no part of the path so far had been particularly difficult to traverse.

Pylus would occasionally scout ahead, vanishing and then reappearing to check on their status. He seemed at ease, and that, along with the Golden Apple, gave Celsia a boost of confidence.

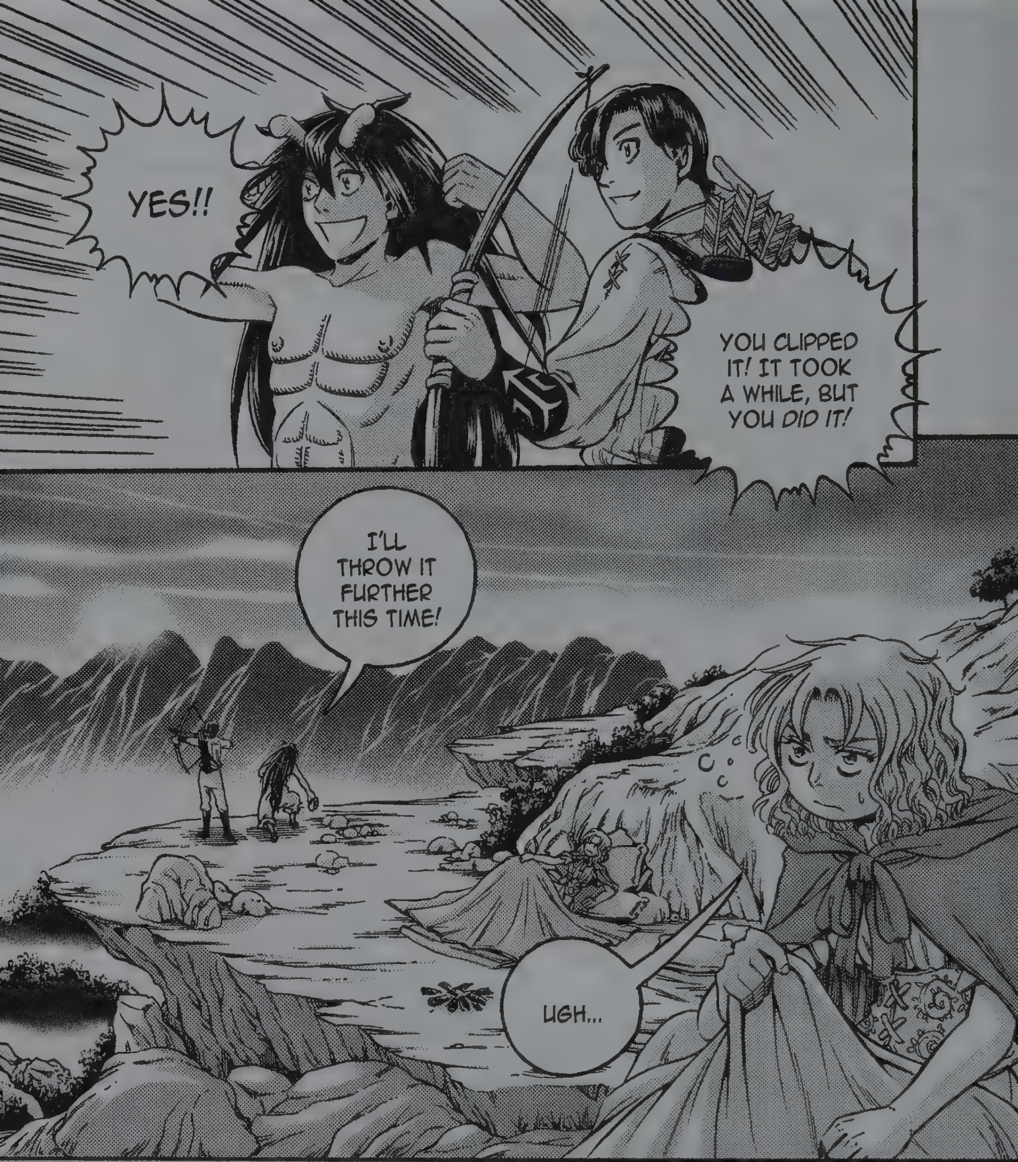
He really is *a mountain goat*, she thought.


AT THIS RATE, WE SHOULD BE IN FALLINOR IN NO TIME!



6: CURSED KINGDOM

BY QUEENIE CHAN

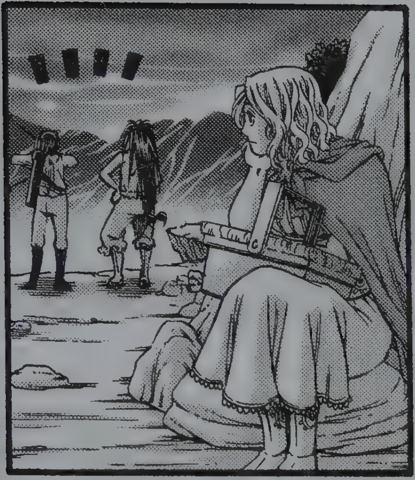

YOU CLIPPED IT! IT TOOK A WHILE, BUT YOU *DID* IT!
YES!!
I'LL THROW IT FURTHER THIS TIME!
UGH...

Celsia slowly got to her feet. Her vision swam, and her mind was still groggy from sleep. From the corner of her eye, she could see Pylus pick up a medium-sized rock, which he then hurled off the edge of the cliff. Immediately after, Quillon loosed an arrow from his bow.

This was the *second* morning they've decided to announce the results of their sport by shouting loud enough to wake an entire village.

She closed her eyes and gave her temples a quick rub. A burst of disappointed groans told her that Quillon had probably missed his shot.

Are those two best friends now?



It was a harmless game, but it exacerbated her bad mood. She had slept poorly and her body ached all over, but it was more than just the discomfort of rough travel. Just last night, she had discovered that her little cache of jewels from the dwarves was missing.

She had carefully wrapped it in her red hood before stashing it into Quillon's travel bag. It was the night before they left Thromsby, and she had even bundled it up with rope. Imagine her horror, when she finally pulled the little package out after a week and discovered nothing but an empty sack.

How could this happen? I'd been so careful!

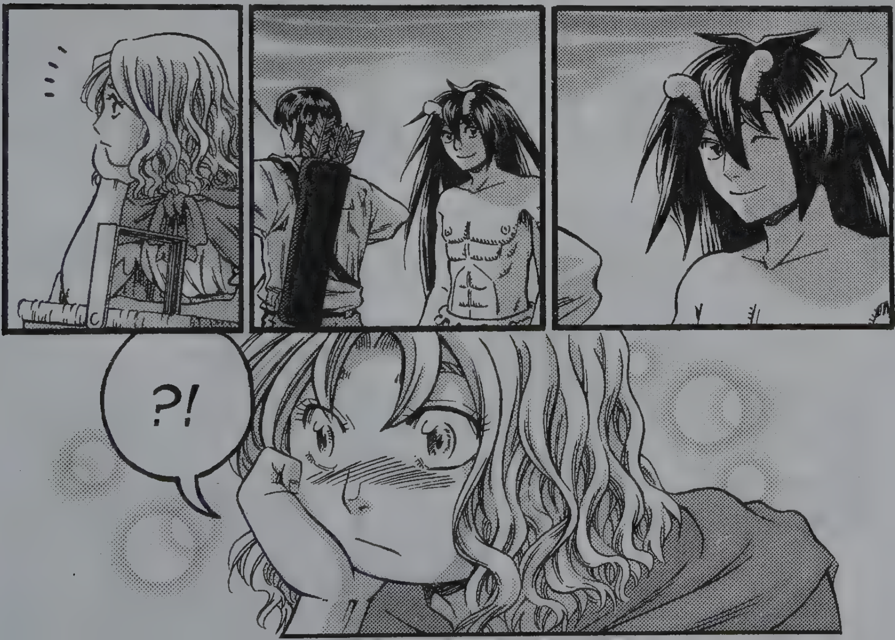
Her first thought was to ask Pylus for his sack of jewels, but all she got was a cheeky grin.

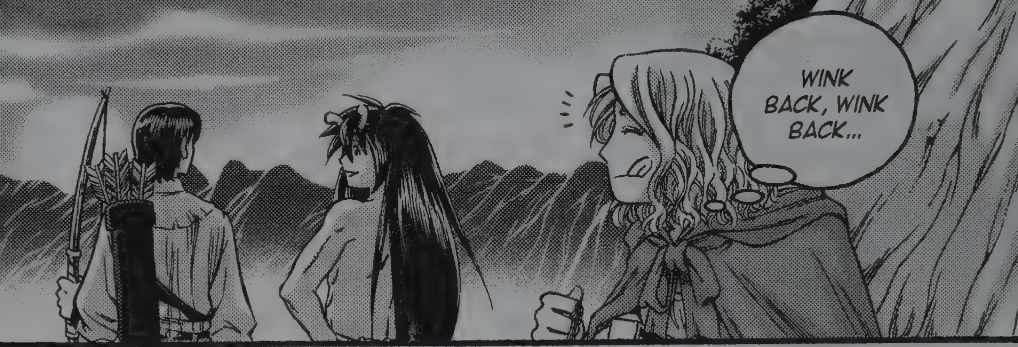
'You want to see my *jewels*?' he had said gleefully. 'They're inside my pants, so *reach in* if you want to grab a handful!'

'On second thought, I shouldn't,' Celsia replied. 'I only wanted to tear them out of their sack and hurl them off the mountainside.'

Pylus had cringed. 'What a waste,' he muttered, edging away.

Celsia sighed. In the end, Pylus still had all his jewels in its original sack, so she couldn't even blame the dwarves for giving her enchanted diamonds that vanished after a while.

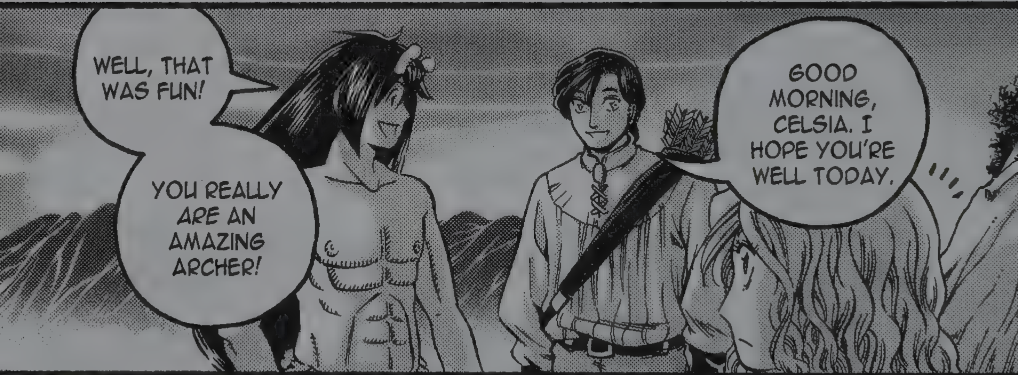



WINK BACK, WINK BACK...

Darn, he's turned away.

Pylus tossed another rock, as Quillon launched an arrow in hot pursuit. Both rock and arrow converged in the distance, before suddenly colliding with each other to set off another round of victory whoops. The energy levels of those two were *astounding*. Two days of climbing had not failed to dampen their spirits; instead, the cool mountain air only served to make them even *more* enthusiastic.

Perhaps I need to do more physical activities, Celsia thought. She started to pack up their bedrolls and blankets, depositing them back into her hamper and Quillon's travel bags. As she worked, a minor jolt of muscle pain shot up her leg, and she winced. *Yes, I really do.*


WELL, THAT WAS FUN!
YOU REALLY ARE AN AMAZING ARCHER!
GOOD MORNING, CELSIA. I HOPE YOU'RE WELL TODAY.

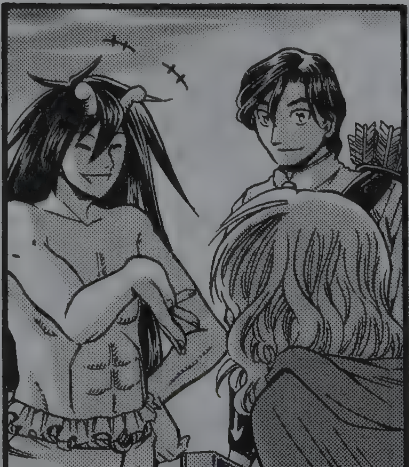
'Of course she's *well*,' Pylus said, 'It's time for breakfast! I'd like a pidgeon pie with figs and a pear!'

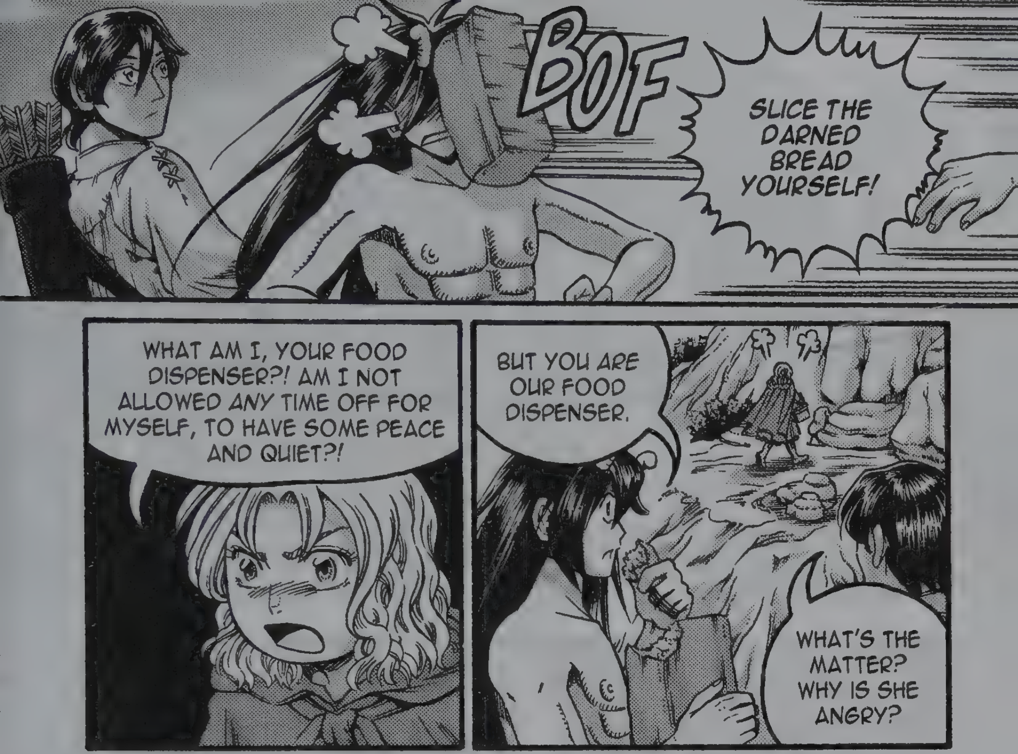
'I'd like some new arrows. Just normal ones will do, thank you.'

'I want a hot water bottle.'

'Porridge with bacon, a slice of cheese, and a glass of ale, please.'

'Also, a freshly-baked loaf of white bread. Thickly sliced.'



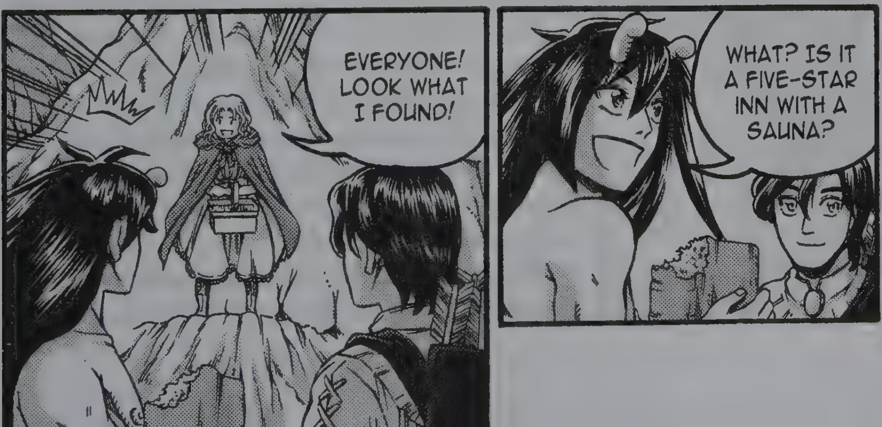

BOF
SLICE THE DARNED BREAD YOURSELF!
WHAT AM I, YOUR FOOD DISPENSER?! AM I NOT ALLOWED ANY TIME OFF FOR MYSELF, TO HAVE SOME PEACE AND QUIET?!
BUT YOU ARE OUR FOOD DISPENSER.
WHAT'S THE MATTER? WHY IS SHE ANGRY?

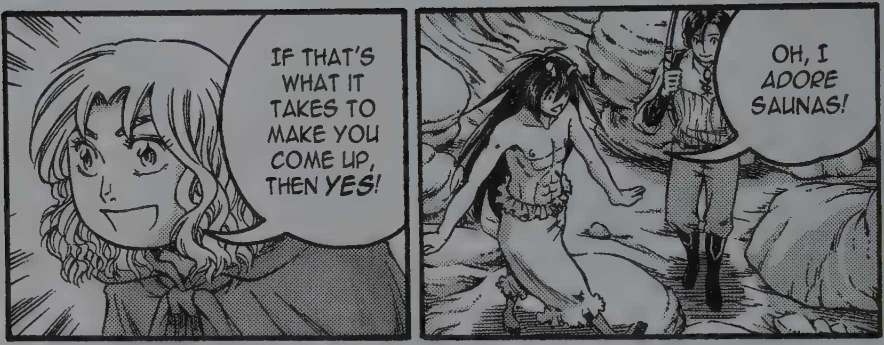
'It may have something to do with the movement of the tides, or the phases of the moon,' Pylus said sagely. They watched Celsia storm up the mountain, the cloak of her red hood flailing in the wind. She soon vanished behind several boulders in front of a steep rock face. They waited, but she didn't return.

Pylus turned to Quillon. 'I've heard that human girls are strange and temperamental creatures that must either be handled with great care, or given a wide berth...'

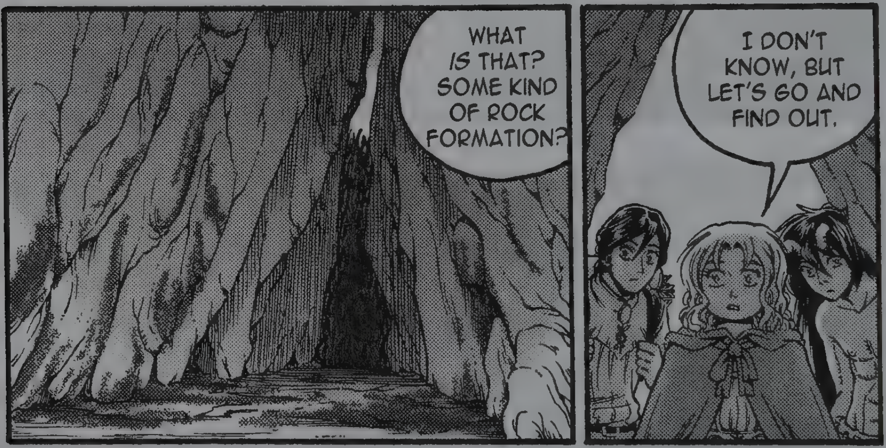
They were so engrossed in the conversation they failed to hear the pounding footsteps coming back towards them.

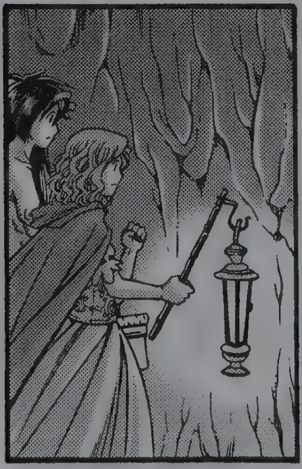
'—much like the chestnut bullhorn or the flat-nosed mole-bear, they are best hunted in the wet seasons, preferably Spring—'


EVERYONE! LOOK WHAT I FOUND!
WHAT? IS IT A FIVE-STAR INN WITH A SAUNA?


IF THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE YOU COME UP, THEN *YES*!
OH, I ADORE SAUNAS!

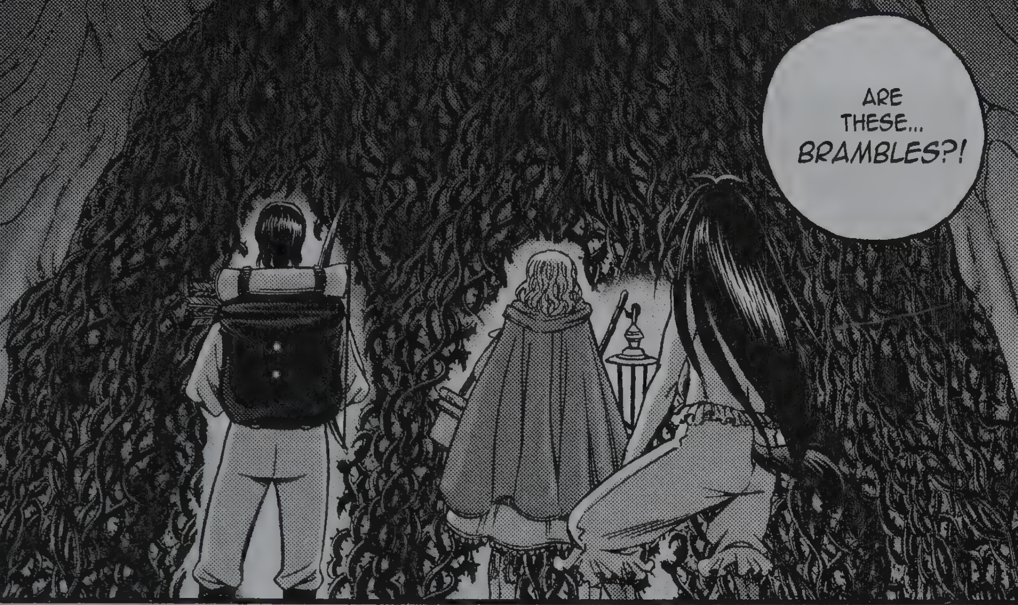
They made their way over to her, where they saw a tall crevice in the rock wall. It was several yards wide and filled with a surprising amount of sunlight, which illuminated a path going deep into the cavity of the rock. At the other end, a large mass of black could be seen blocking the exit.


WHAT *IS* THAT? SOME KIND OF ROCK FORMATION?
I DON'T KNOW, BUT LET'S GO AND FIND OUT.



Celsia pulled a lantern from her hamper, and they ventured into the narrow passageway. It was cool and slightly damp, with droplets of water running in small rivulets down the walls and moss creeping across the floors. When she looked up, only a small sliver of sky was visible.

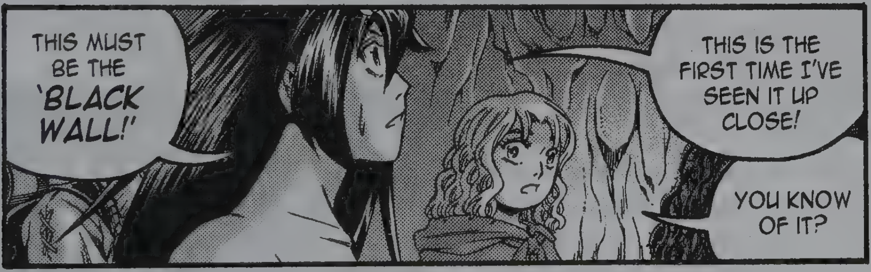
Once they reached the middle, the wetness diminished. The dark mass at the end of the tunnel seemed to be sucking all the moisture out of the air, and by the time they reached it, the surrounding space was almost crackling with static electricity.


ARE THESE... BRAMBLES?!

It was enormous, a tangled mass of black vines that formed an impenetrable wall at least twenty feet high. The brambles were dense and tightly-woven, and while no leaves or flowers sprouted from them, scores of prickly thorns bristled from the branches.

'Why is it so big, and *black*? Is it dead?' Quillon said.

'I don't think so,' Celsia replied. 'That appears to be its natural colour.' As she studied it, the wall seemed to shudder, pulsating as if it were a living, breathing mass. It was mesmerising, and Celsia could not help but find herself being drawn to it.


THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I'VE SEEN IT UP CLOSE!
THIS MUST BE THE 'BLACK WALL!'
YOU KNOW OF IT?

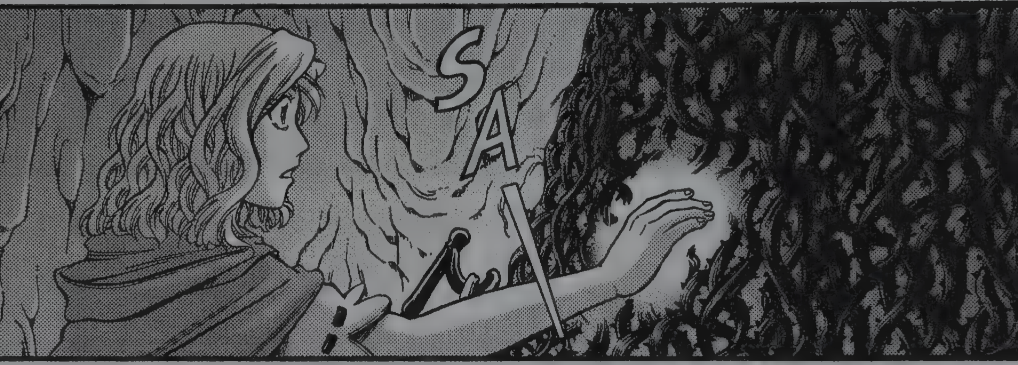
'Everyone in Westerwick and Anatolia knows of it,' Pylus murmured in reply. He seemed transfixed by the sight. 'The Black Wall is what keeps the neighbouring kingdoms safe from the Cursed Kingdom and the Black Queen. It's a hundred-foot-high magical barrier that surrounds the entirety of Fallinor. You can see it in the distance from Starkport and even Fort Clarrikin, and you can't miss it if you travel down the River Idine. The Black Wall was always rumoured to be made of black brambles, and I'm surprised it's true.'

'Were you *ever* going to tell us that such a thing exists?' Celsia said in irritation. 'You know we're trying to get to Fallinor!'

Pylus shrugged in nonchalance. 'I *said* I'd only take you to the border, didn't I? I figured you'll take one look at this and recognise the impossibility of the task.'

Celsia turned her attention back to the brambles. Subtly, they seem to be shifting, like flesh moving beneath the skin of a snake.

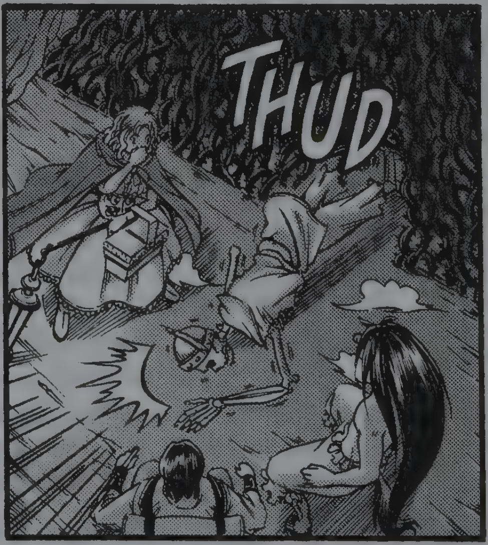
'The Black Wall...' she whispered in a low voice. She extended a hand to touch the vines.



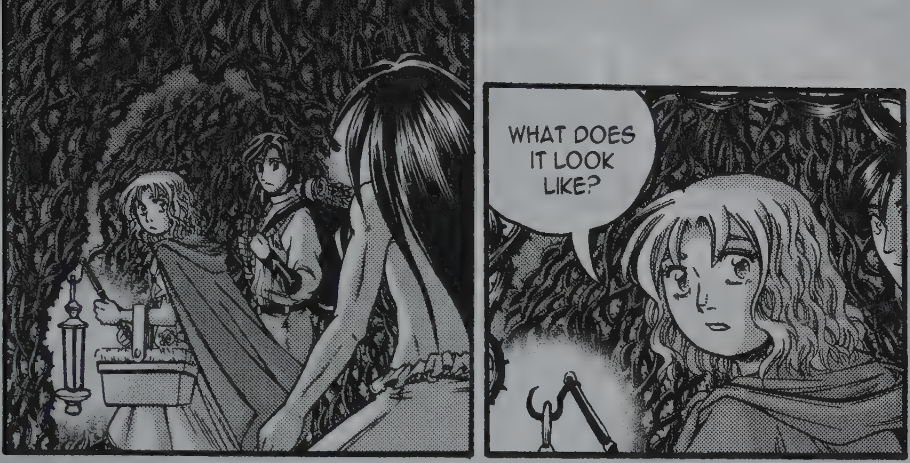
The vines wriggled. They recoiled, shying away from her hand.

'Hey, look! The brambles are moving!' Celsia cried. Quillon gasped in wonder, while Pylus gawked. As Celsia plunged her hand in further, the wall rippled like water. The ink-black vines curled into themselves, twisting backwards and forming a cavity. Soon, they revealed a round, chalk-white object enmeshed within the wall.

It fell noisily to the floor. Celsia barely managed to step aside, a little scream escaping her when she saw what it was. It was an ancient skeleton, its bones bleached white but still dressed in a tunic and a helmet. They stared at it in silence.



'A foolhardy adventurer or treasure hunter who must have met his end by starvation,' Pylus muttered. 'There are bound to be more of them in there. Wait. Celsia, stop! What are you *doing*?!'


WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

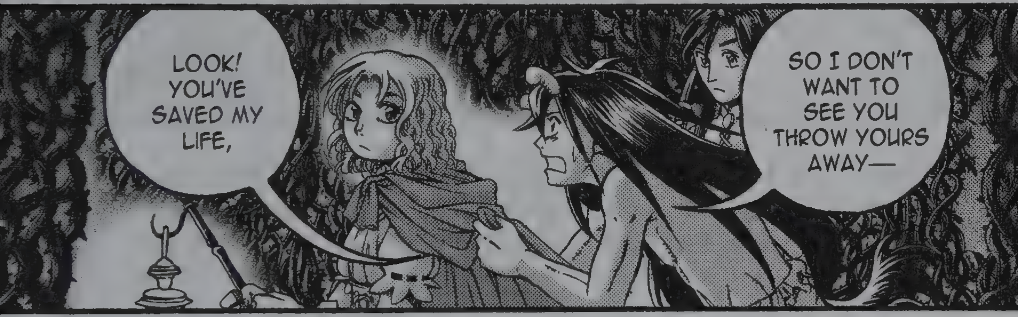
'Are you *insane*?! Come back out!' Pylus cried. 'Doesn't this skeleton scare you one bit? There has to be dozens more in there!'

'I'm not like these unfortunate souls. I have my hamper.'

'But—'

'Calm down and come along! It seems to be safe.'

Pylus hesitated for a moment, his teeth biting hard into his lower lip. Then he raced forward, running straight into the gap to grab a fistful of Celsia's cloak.


LOOK! YOU'VE SAVED MY LIFE,
SO I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU THROW YOURS AWAY—

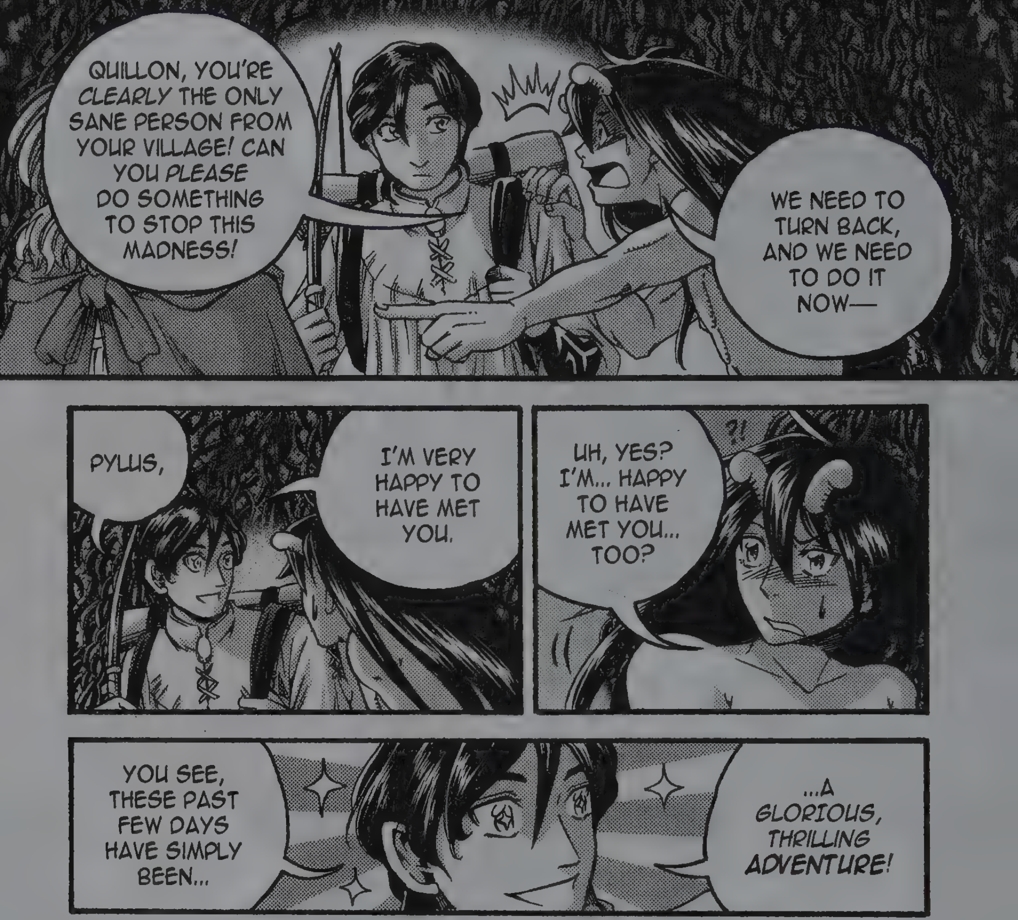
Suddenly, the passageway grew dim. Pylus whipped around, to see the brambles merging back together at the entrance. Although no light could filter through, somehow it wasn't entirely dark.

'Now we're trapped!'

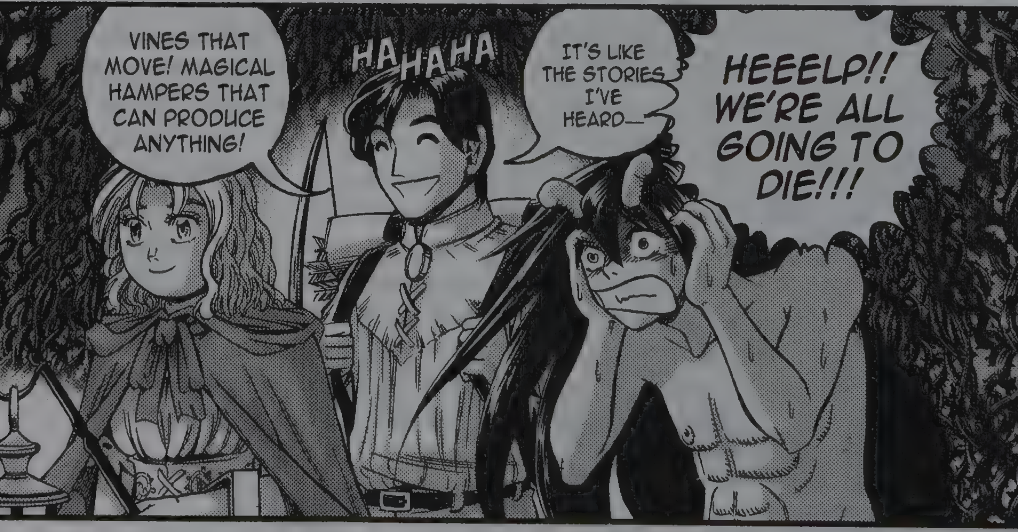
'Why are you so worried? The brambles aren't hurting us.'

'The brambles aren't hurting *you*!' Pylus shouted, his arms flailing as his pitch rose to a near-hysteria. A stray thorn snagged a few strands of his hair, and he stopped, wincing.

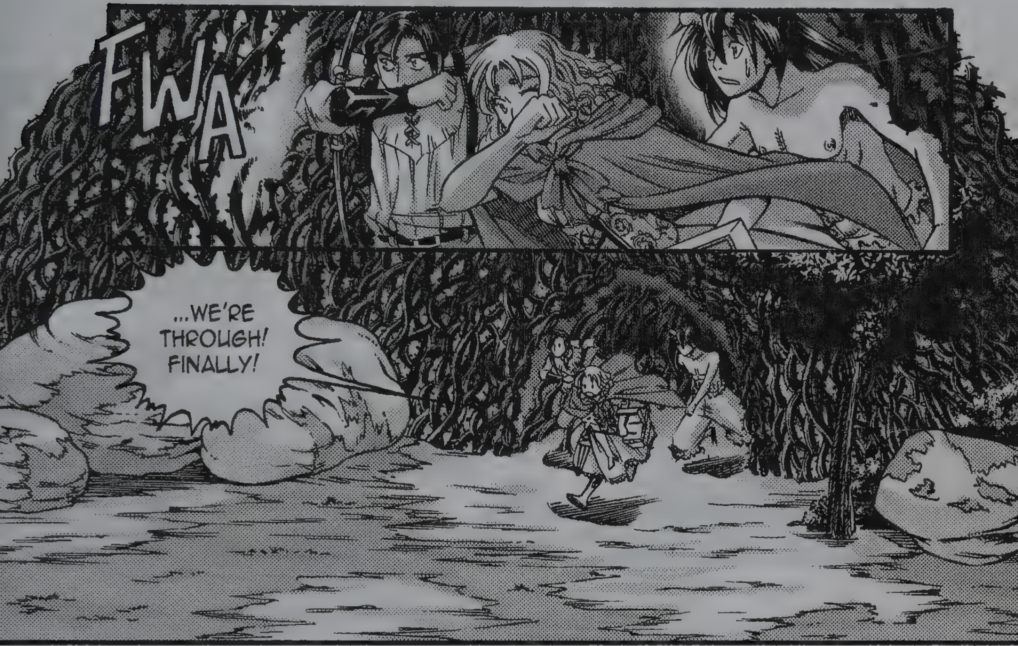
Celsia took a few steps forward, holding her lantern low. The light illuminated the path beneath her, bouncing off a smooth rock surface. The path appeared to be on a gradual, downward slope, so Celsia moved slowly, gingerly putting one foot in front of the other.


QUILLON, YOU'RE CLEARLY THE ONLY SANE PERSON FROM YOUR VILLAGE! CAN YOU *PLEASE* DO SOMETHING TO STOP THIS MADNESS!
WE NEED TO TURN BACK, AND WE NEED TO DO IT NOW—
PYLUS,
I'M VERY HAPPY TO HAVE MET YOU.
?!
UH, YES? I'M... HAPPY TO HAVE MET YOU... TOO?
YOU SEE, THESE PAST FEW DAYS HAVE SIMPLY BEEN...
...A GLORIOUS, THRILLING **ADVENTURE!**

'I've been sleeping under the stars, scaling impossible mountains, communing with nature, and now, *exploring a cursed kingdom*! It's the chance of a lifetime, and the remarkable journey I have always yearned for as a boy!'

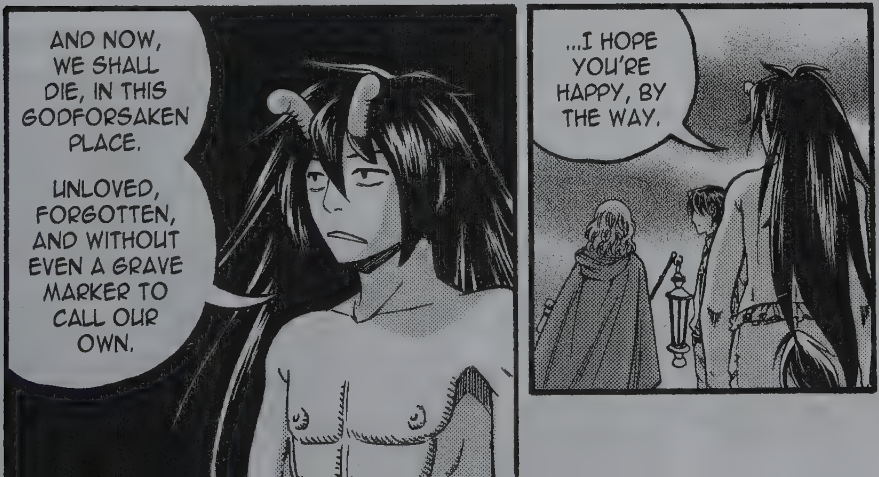

VINES THAT MOVE! MAGICAL HAMPERS THAT CAN PRODUCE ANYTHING!
HAHAHAHA
IT'S LIKE THE STORIES I'VE HEARD—
HEEELP!! WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!!!

They continued their slow descent, guided by little more than the flickering light of Celsia's lantern. In time, the brambles began to thin, and small rays of sunlight started to pierce their cocoon. Suddenly, a blast of wind hit their faces.

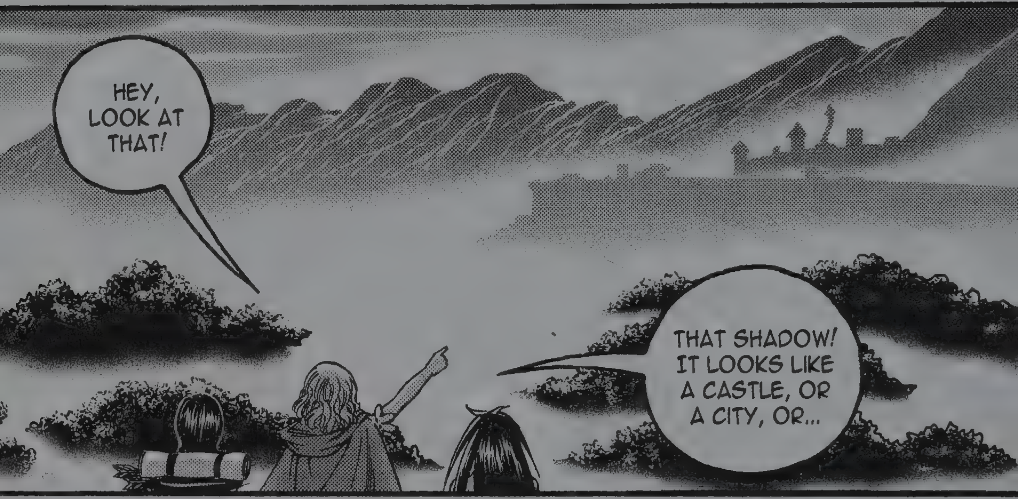

FWA
...WE'RE THROUGH! FINALLY!

'Is this it? Are we in Fallinor?' Celsia asked. She looked around anxiously, but the air was as thick as soup. Floating specks of dust permeated the air, rendering everything grey and smoky.

'Of course we are,' Pylus said in an unhelpful monotone. 'Just look at how dull and desolate the landscape is. This is how I've always imagined the Underworld to be, except a lot less colourful.'


AND NOW, WE SHALL DIE, IN THIS GODFORSAKEN PLACE.
UNLOVED, FORGOTTEN, AND WITHOUT EVEN A GRAVE MARKER TO CALL OUR OWN.
...I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY, BY THE WAY.

'Oh, you are so pessimistic!' Celsia said. Now that she has had a better look around, it was disappointing, but not overwhelmingly so. They were standing on a mountainside, but unlike the other side of the Crescent Ranges, these hills were alive and green with grass and flowers. She could see the lush foothills from where she stood, and compared to earlier, it looked to be a kinder, gentler trip downhill.


HEY, LOOK AT THAT!
THAT SHADOW! IT LOOKS LIKE A CASTLE, OR A CITY, OR...

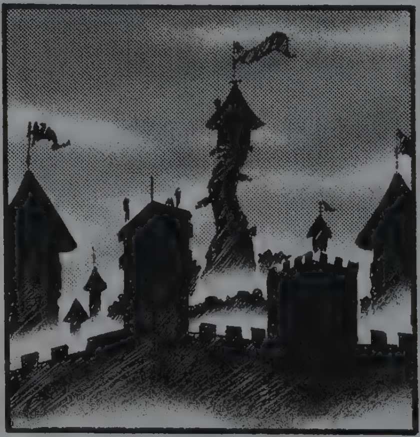
'Or a dungeon, or a crypt, or the lair of an evil monster...'

Celsia scowled at the faun. 'This is getting tiresome. Didn't you say you will only accompany us to the borders? Seeing you're here, you may as well come along and explore the kingdom.'

Pylus gave a hapless shrug. He started to wave his arms in the air, as if preparing to launch a speech on the *injustice* of it all, but he eventually gave up with a sigh.

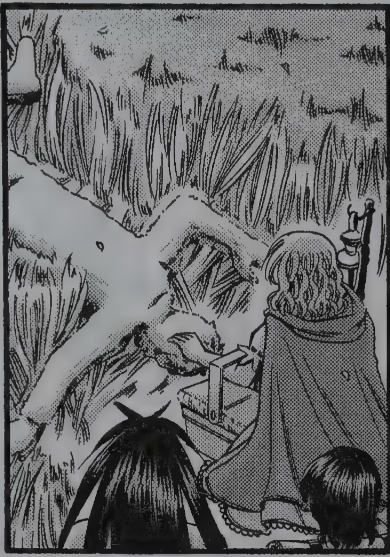
'So, come along,' Celsia said, giving him her brightest smile. Pylus' only response was to wave his hands in a '*you first*' gesture.

The shadow turned out to be further away than it looked, so they stopped for breakfast before continuing. As they closed the distance, it began to take definitive form. First, there were great big walls topped by battlements, followed by spiralling towers with spires and flagpoles. Murky edges sharpened into distinct architectural shapes, and soon, it was clear that it was an enormous castle surrounded by a city.



Eventually, they found themselves treading through a field. Sunlight slanted through the fog, revealing small, squat structures—farmhouses distorted by the refraction of light hitting the dust particles.

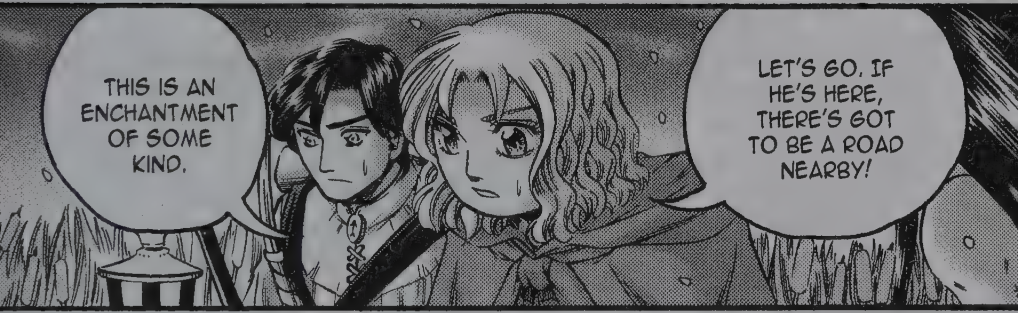
'*Woah!*'



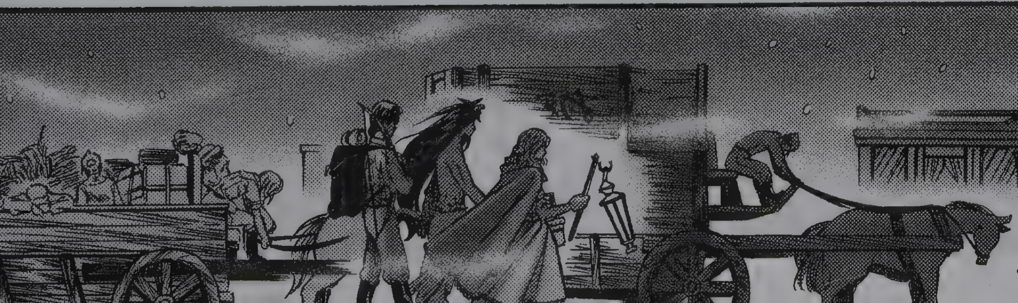
Pylus stumbled over something, his hoofs kicking up a cloud of dirt. A cursory examination revealed thick stubs of fleshy pink—a finger, followed by a hand, attached to a grown man's body lying prone on the ground.

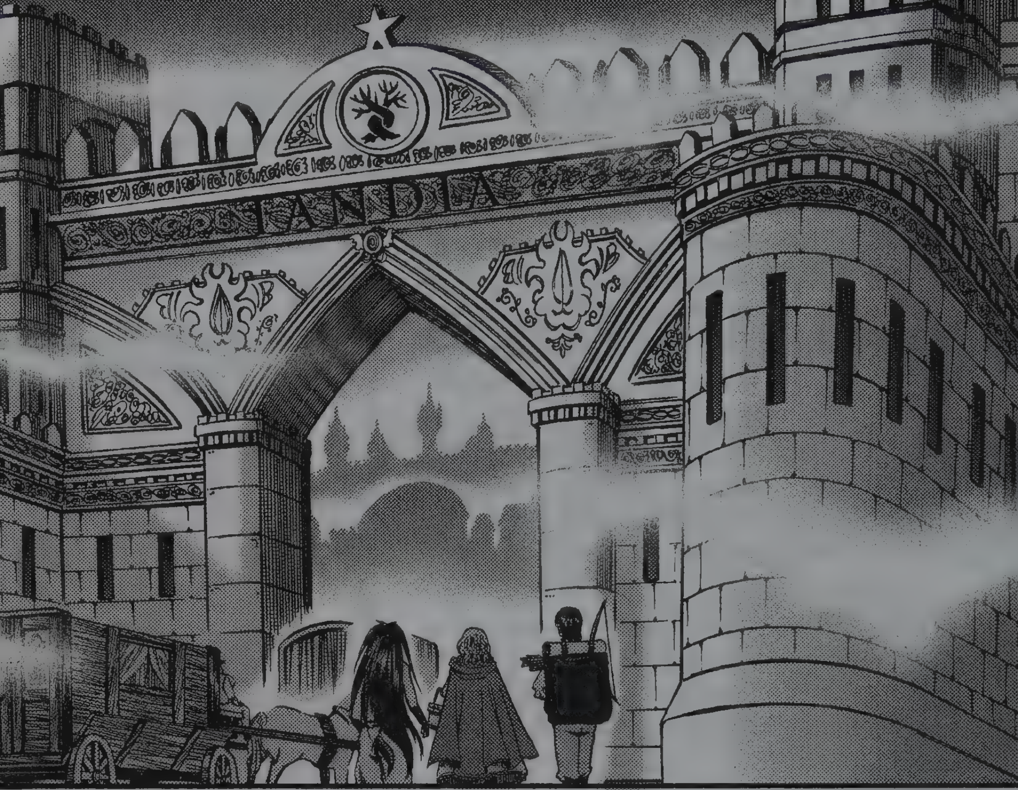
Nobody said anything. After a long silence, Celsia kneeled and brushed back the thick layer of dust that covered the man like a blanket of snow. Her hand moved to his throat.

'He's alive,' she whispered after a while. 'He's not breathing, but he has a pulse.' She opened one of his eyes, shining her lantern into it.


LET'S GO. IF HE'S HERE, THERE'S GOT TO BE A ROAD NEARBY!
THIS IS AN ENCHANTMENT OF SOME KIND.

There was. They stumbled onto it soon enough, when Quillon almost stepped into a ditch. They followed the dirt path to the ancient city, just as scores of ramshackle houses began to appear—ugly little sheds held together by boards and nails. A procession of fallen bodies laid in the middle of the road, some accompanied by carts, wagons and even sleeping horses. Their destination towered over them.

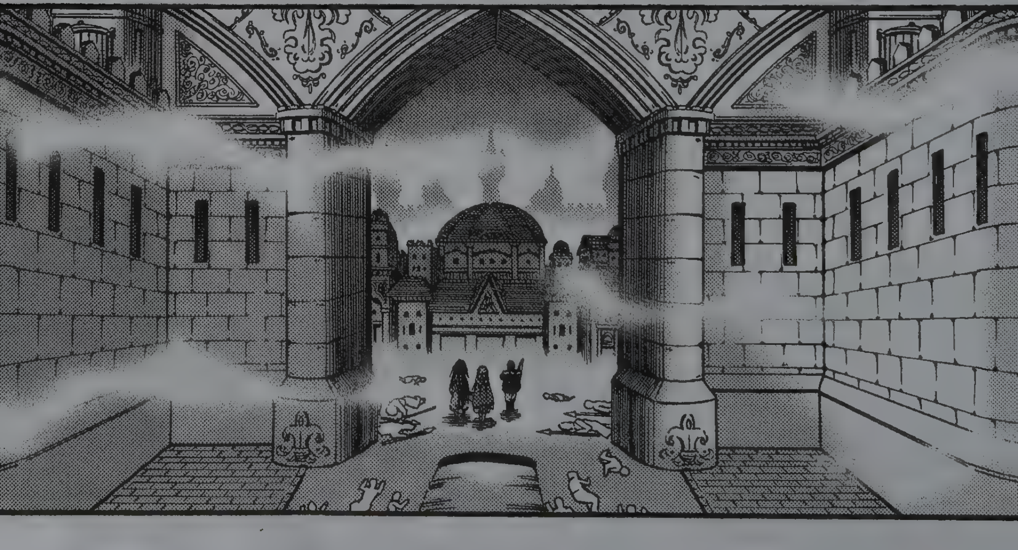




It was painful to crane their necks up for so long. The intimidating walls were a pale grey, many shades lighter than the inky-black wall of brambles. As they neared the enormous city gates, a single row of letters could be seen, carved into the stone above the arch.

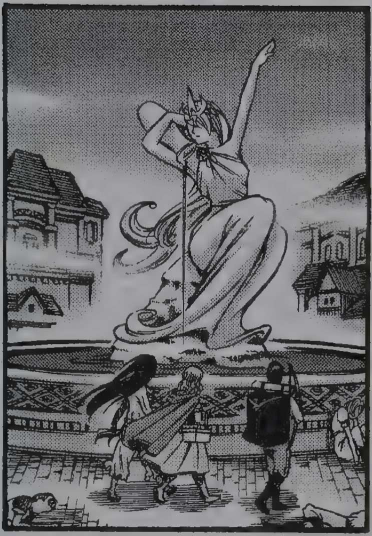
TANDIA, it said in bold print.

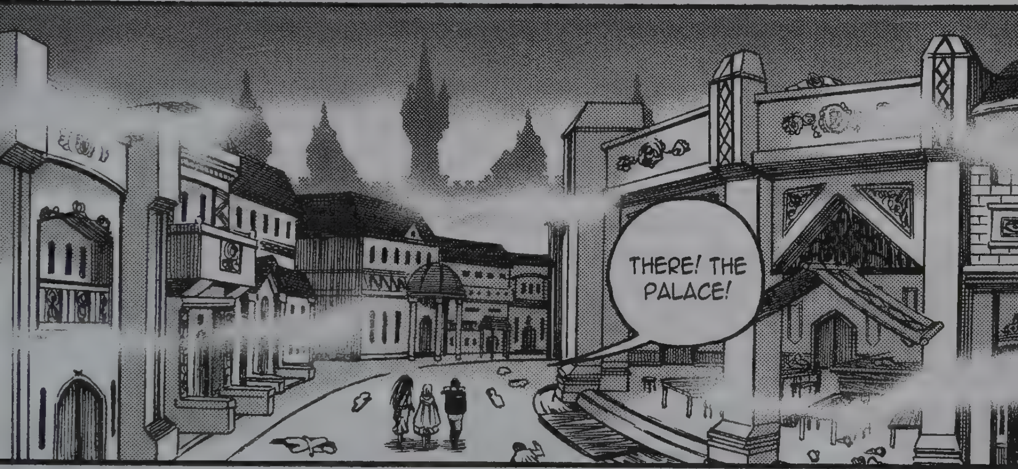
'No *welcome to…?*' Pylus said with a nervous chuckle. His voice echoed, reverberating in the deafening quiet. Not a single soul replied.



The city square was as silent as the grave. Dust particles swirled even thicker here, giving the appearance of falling snow. As they moved through the grand boulevard that cleaved a straight line through half the city, their movements stirred the air like a small blizzard. Beneath them, the soles of their boots rattled off the cobblestone pavement.

'There must be a castle at the end of this road,' Celsia said. Her ears pricked up as she eyed an elegant marble water fountain. Despite being frozen in time, water still trickled through it.

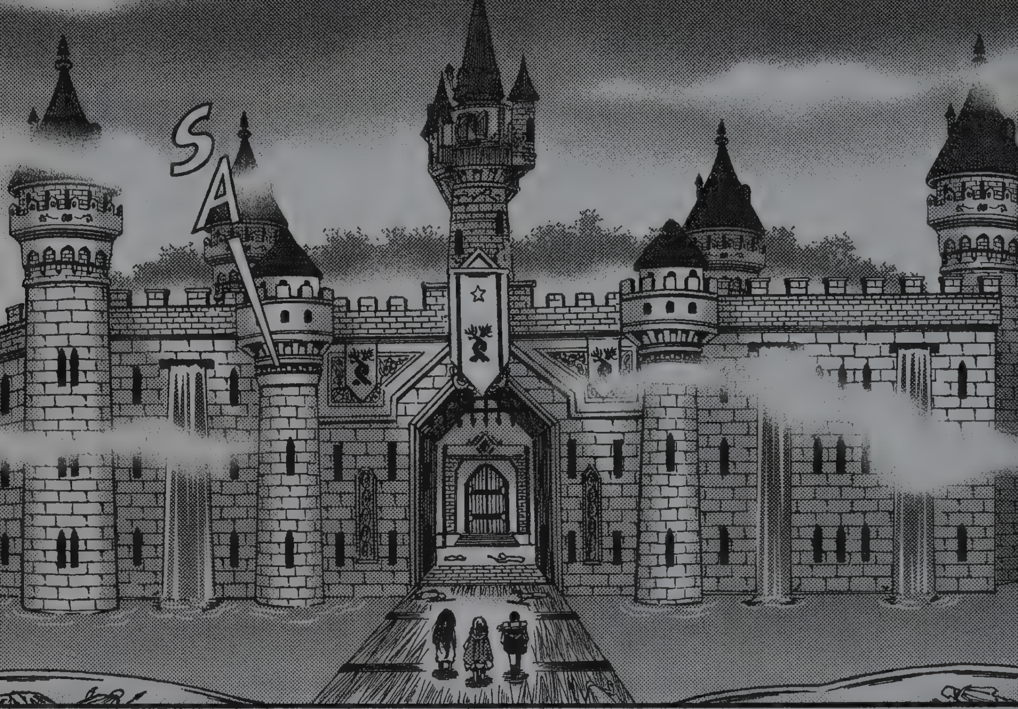



THERE! THE PALACE!

The boulevard veered off to the side, before straightening again as they neared the castle. They followed the curve of the road, with tall townhouses looming to either side of them. By then, they had grown used to the utter lack of sound apart from running water, which flowed through a network of open and covered channels across the city. For Celsia, however, it was the bodies that unnerved her the most.

They were in the most bizarre, banal positions. Caked with dust, many of them appeared to have been ensnared by enchantment while in the midst of everyday tasks, making the whole thing seem like a gruesome pantomime of real life. It was strange and creepy.

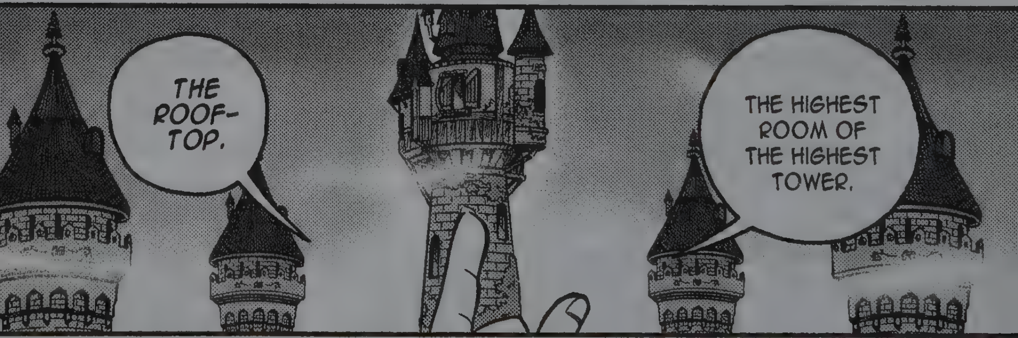
They're not dead though, was all she could bring to mind.



The palace walls were as tall as the city walls, though its colour was the same shade of grey. The stone also carried a faint tint of red, which coupled with the waterfalls cascading down its outer walls, made it seem almost benign. Even the drawbridge was invitingly lowered.

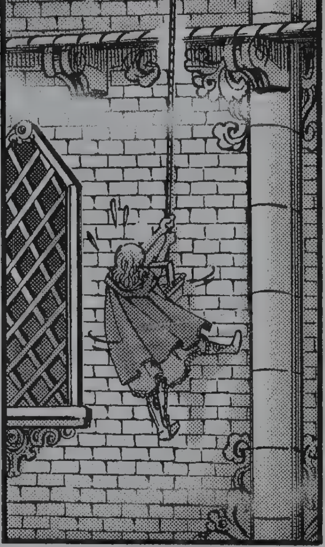
'What next?' Pylus said, turning to his companions. 'Where to?'

Celsia lifted a finger and pointed. She had one eye closed, giving her the appearance of an archer about to hit their mark. Against all reason, she carried a certainty within her. Somehow, she knew where she needed to be.


THE HIGHEST ROOM OF THE HIGHEST TOWER.
THE ROOF-TOP.

The palace doors were barred shut. They stood outside, craning their necks up at the massive exteriors of the four-storey high castle.

Celsia reached into her hamper, and pulled out a grappling hook.



Pylus went first, without even being asked. His aim was solid, and once he had secured the hook to the parapet, he scampered up the wall with surprising speed. No doubt some of the decorative carvings helped his footing.

When Pylus lowered the rope from the rooftop, Celsia saw that he had tied it into a loop big enough for her to insert her foot.

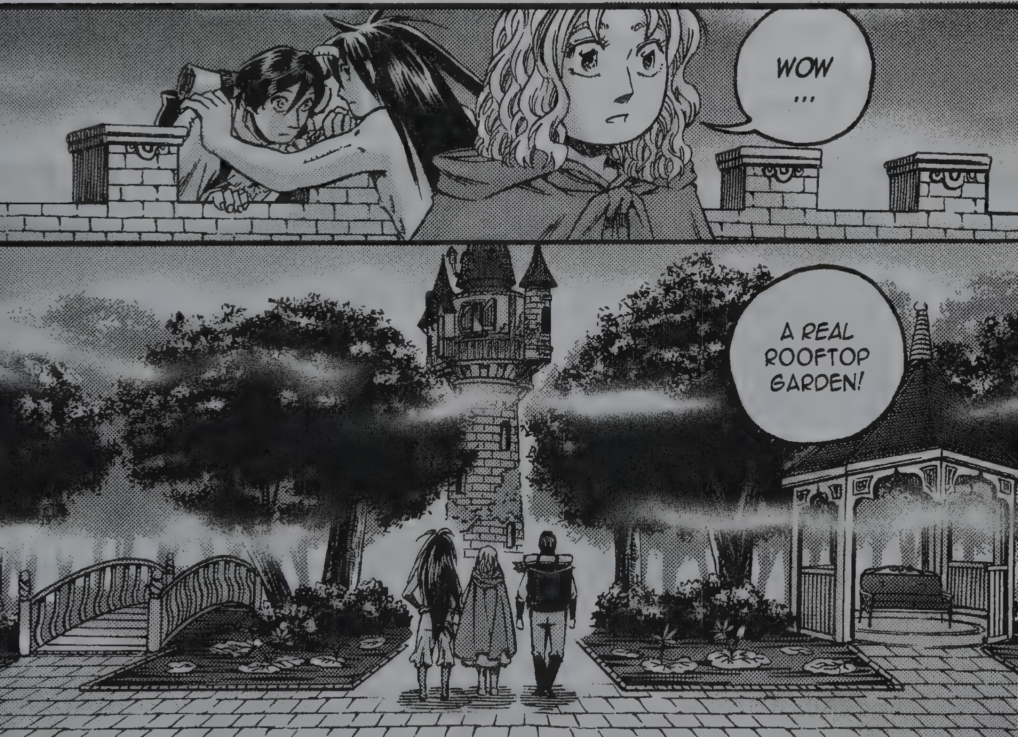
'Ladies first,' said Quillon. Celsia slipped her left foot into the loop, and after testing its sturdiness, gave the rope a tug.

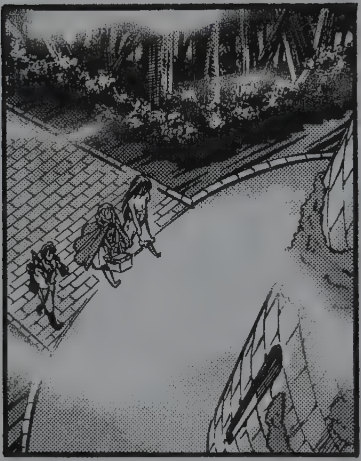
She felt a flash of fear as her feet lifted off the ground. Unfortunately, the rope swayed back and forth, forcing her to ram one heel against the castle wall whenever she looked to be in danger of slamming against it.

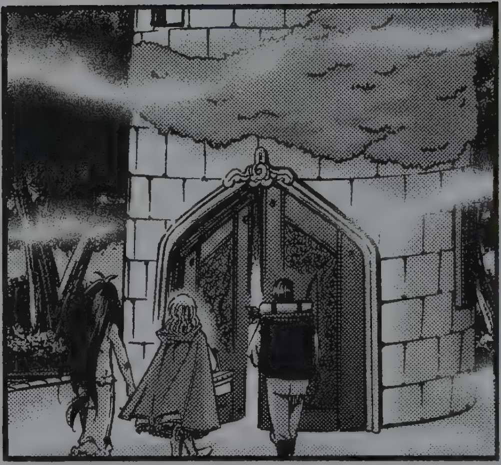
'Slower, Pylus! ...All right, now go faster! ...No, slower again!'

'Slower, faster, slower,' Pylus muttered under his breath. His muscles bulged with the exertion of having to change speeds every time Celsia shrieked. 'She sure is demanding.'

The moment Celsia clambered onto the roof, Pylus threw the rope back down to Quillon. So she stood there, slowly drinking in the sights before her.


WOW ...
A REAL ROOFTOP GARDEN!

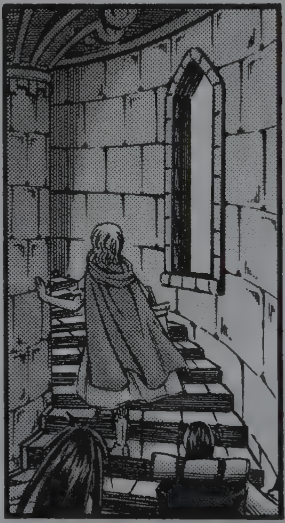


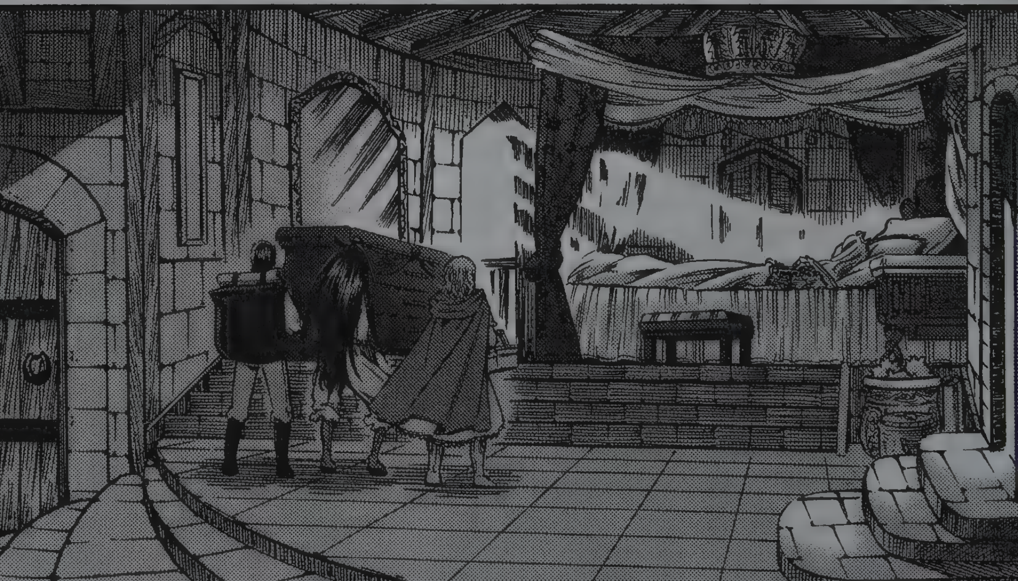


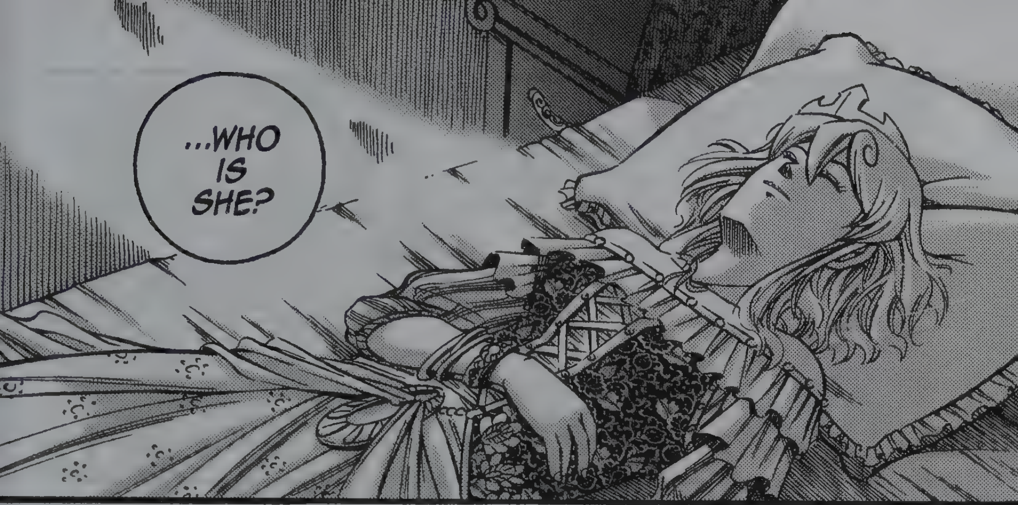
The doors were almost a foot thick, and made entirely out of cast iron. They looked too heavy for a single person to budge, so Celsia was grateful they were slightly ajar. Once inside, a spiralling stairway greeted them, which they started to climb.

The stairs were steep and narrow, and the three of them clung to the sides as they walked. The stones were roughly hewn, and seemed much older than the rest of the palace. Occasionally, they would peek out of the tower's windows and marvel at the view.

Eventually, a plain wooden door appeared. It opened into a circular room.



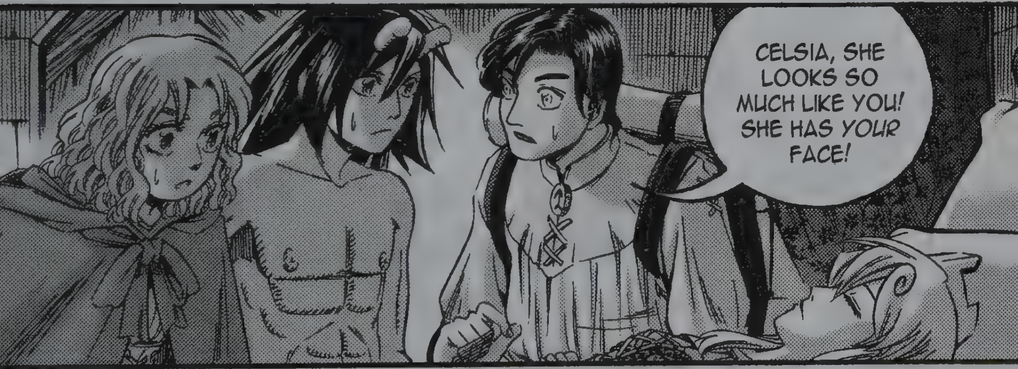


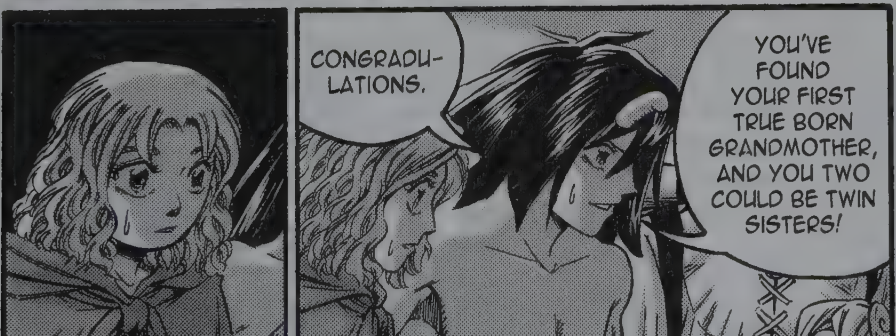


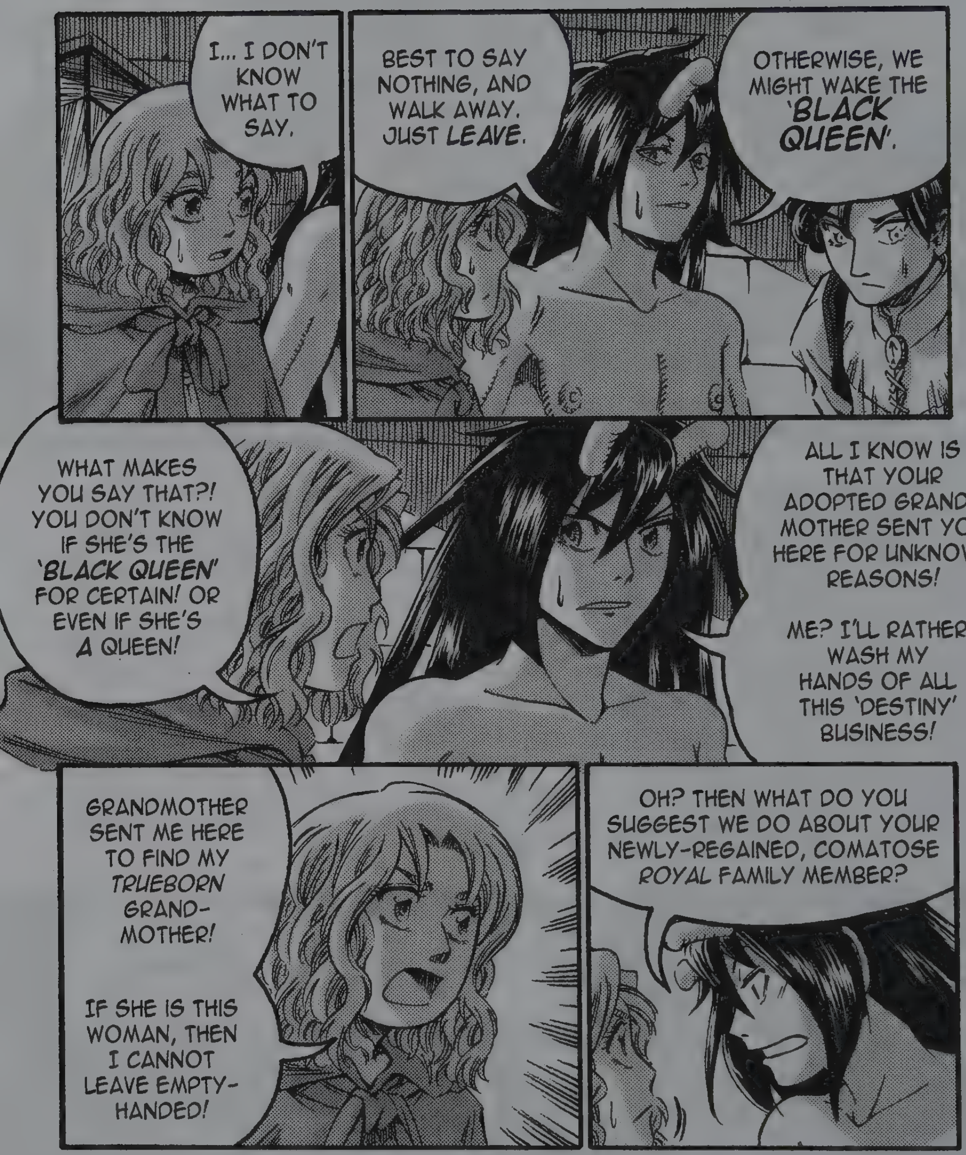
Dust had barely touched the room, despite the open window. The heavily-embroidered drapes and mahogany furniture all retained their original colours, a vibrant blend of velvety green and rich browns. The bedspread was pure white, with gold trimmings.

Sunlight lit the flaxen-haired woman, basking her in an ethereal glow. Her rose-coloured gown was studded with pearls, and the simple gold crown perched on her head marked her status as royal.

Celsia quietly approached the bed. She was followed by Pylus and Quillon, treading equally lightly. When she leaned down to inspect the queen's all-too-familiar face, she could see that she was only a few years older than Celsia at most.


CELSIA, SHE LOOKS SO MUCH LIKE YOU! SHE HAS YOUR FACE!

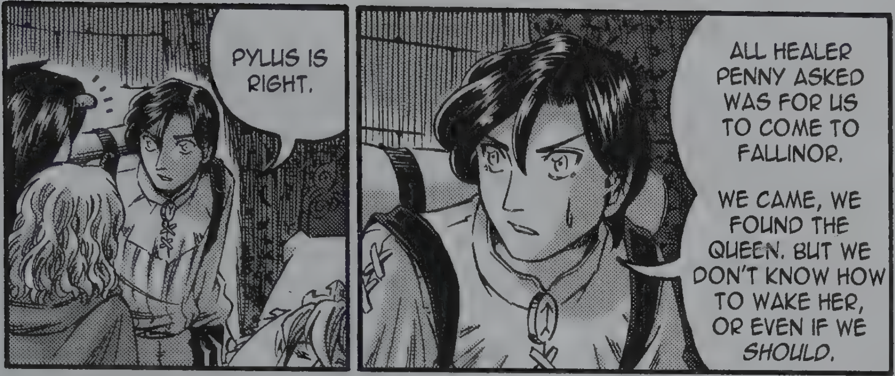

CONGRADULATIONS.
YOU'VE FOUND YOUR FIRST TRUE BORN GRANDMOTHER, AND YOU TWO COULD BE TWIN SISTERS!

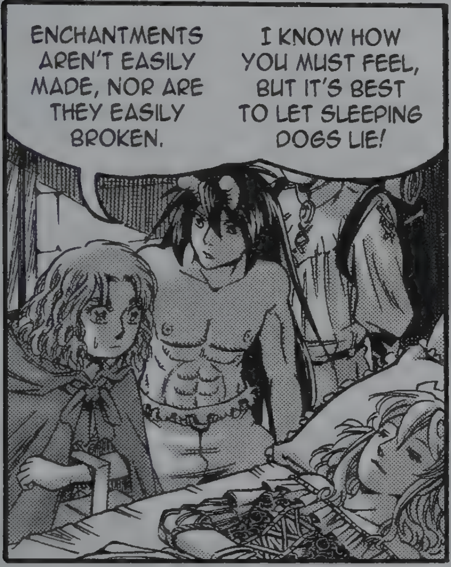

I... I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY.
BEST TO SAY NOTHING, AND WALK AWAY. JUST *LEAVE*.
OTHERWISE, WE MIGHT WAKE THE '*BLACK QUEEN*'.
WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?! YOU DON'T KNOW IF SHE'S THE '*BLACK QUEEN*' FOR CERTAIN! OR EVEN IF SHE'S A QUEEN!
ALL I KNOW IS THAT YOUR ADOPTED GRANDMOTHER SENT YOU HERE FOR UNKNOWN REASONS!
ME? I'LL RATHER WASH MY HANDS OF ALL THIS 'DESTINY' BUSINESS!
GRANDMOTHER SENT ME HERE TO FIND MY *TRUEBORN* GRANDMOTHER!
IF SHE IS THIS WOMAN, THEN I CANNOT LEAVE EMPTY-HANDED!
OH? THEN WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST WE DO ABOUT YOUR NEWLY-REGAINED, COMATOSE ROYAL FAMILY MEMBER?

Celsia clenched her fists by her side. She looked down at the sleeping woman who may very well be her '*Young*' Trueborn Grandmother. Right now, she was like a riddle wrapped in a mystery, an enigma encased in enchanted silence. So close, yet so far away.

'All I know is that Grandmother will never knowingly send me into harm's way,' she eventually replied, still stubborn. 'Even if she *is* the '*Black Queen*,' she *cannot* be that evil Witch-Queen you spoke of in your stories.'

'Not *knowingly*,' said Pylus.


PYLUS IS RIGHT.
ALL HEALER PENNY ASKED WAS FOR US TO COME TO FALLINOR.
WE CAME, WE FOUND THE QUEEN. BUT WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO WAKE HER, OR EVEN IF WE *SHOULD*.

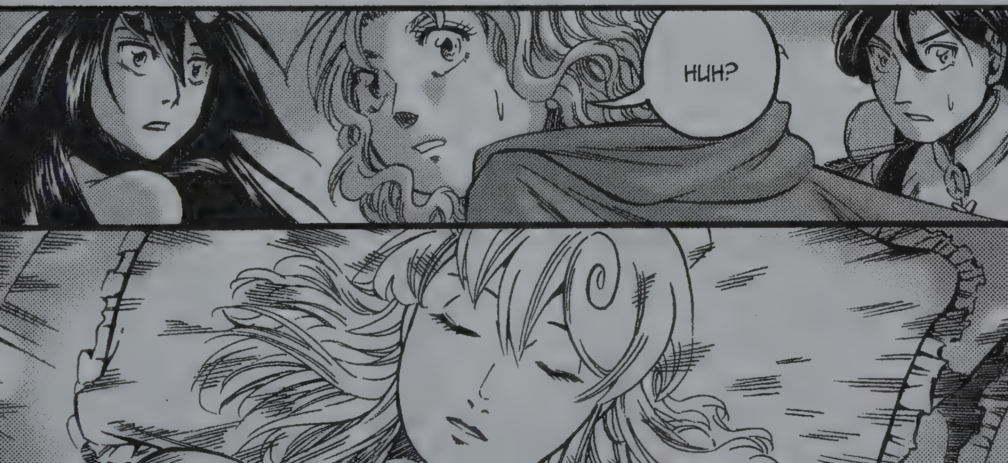

ENCHANTMENTS AREN'T EASILY MADE, NOR ARE THEY EASILY BROKEN.
I KNOW HOW YOU MUST FEEL, BUT IT'S BEST TO LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE!

'...No disrespect meant to any sleeping women present,' Pylus added hastily.

Celsia bent down, and cast a longing look at the one person who could have all the answers to her questions. The queen seemed at peace. Her face was composed in a restful calm, freed in eternal sleep from all the worries of the world.

Perhaps it's best to leave for now, she thought. *I can come back later, after I've found my other Trueborn Grandmother.*

She turned to leave, to the visible relief of the others. As they walked towards the door, a sudden crackle of magical energy caused them to stop in their tracks. A cold gust of wind blew past, lifting the dust off the floor. It wasn't coming from the open window.

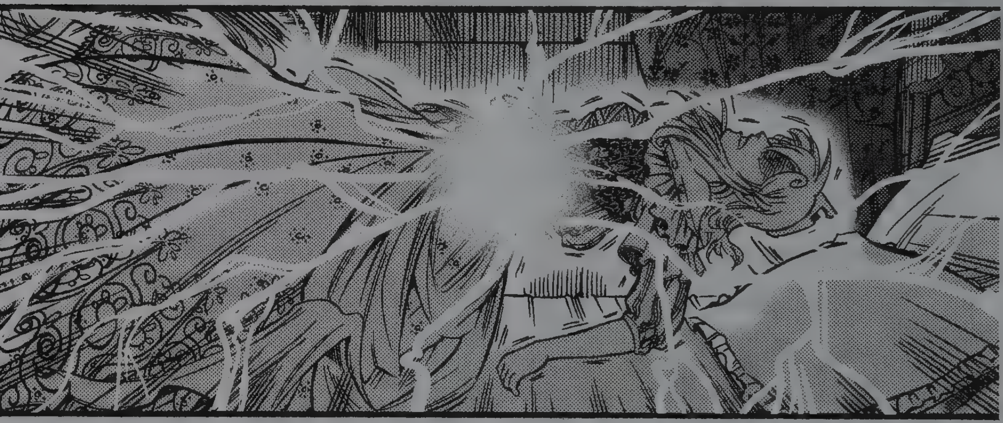


It was soft at first. It sounded like the distant sigh of wind stirring through the trees, but within seconds, it got progressively louder. Soon, it became strained and ragged, like a cough or a wheeze.

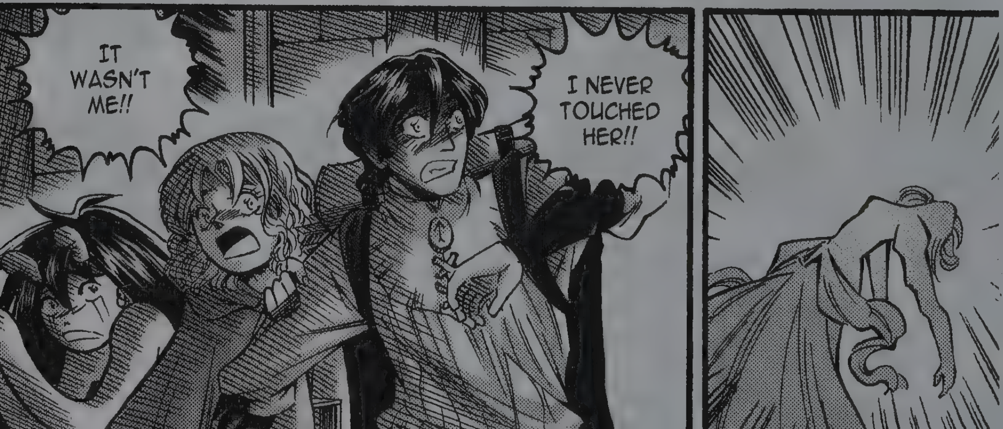
Without warning, there was a blast of air. A whip of wind whirled around the room, emitting a high-pitched scream that caused Quillon to wince and cover his ears. The walls shook and the shutters rattled, a cacophony that failed to overpower the laboured sounds of *someone* desperately trying to drag breath into their lungs.

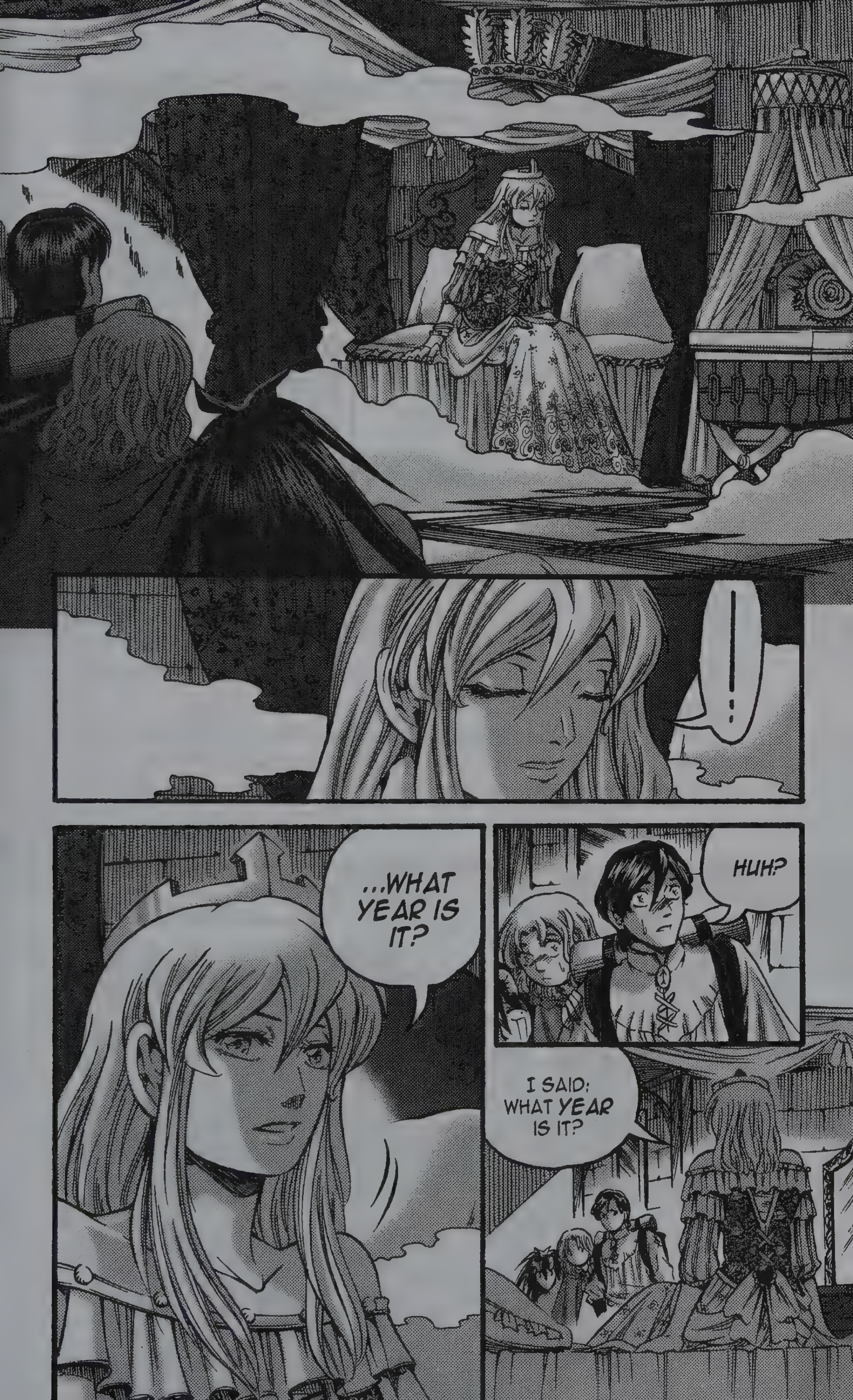
'Look!' Quillon cried. Celsia's eyes bulged, when she saw that the queen's mouth was now opening and closing in time with the breaths.

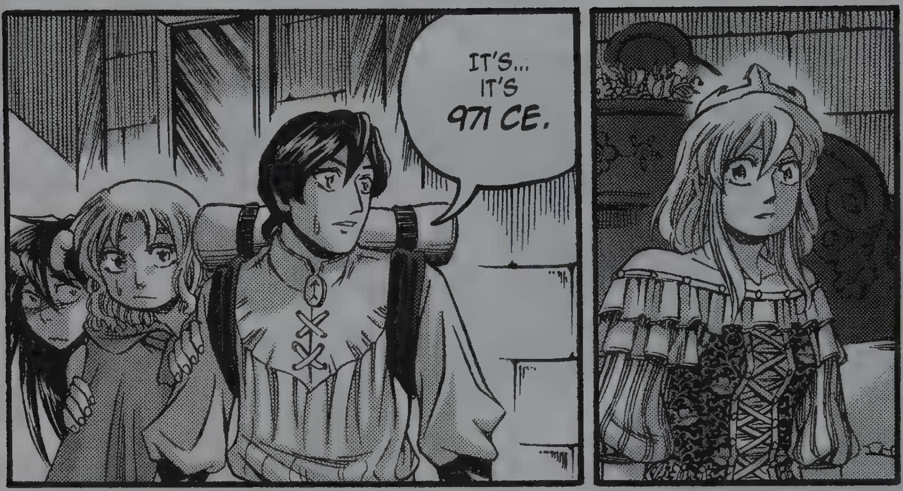
Suddenly, glowing trails of blue light burst from the figure of the sleeping queen. Her body heaved off the bed, lifting upwards with each breath as if her limbs were fighting back powerful restraints that held them down. All the while, the pulsating brightness grew. It was now accompanied by a roaring din.



'I didn't do anything!' Celsia shrieked, grabbing onto Quillon's sleeve. Terrified, the three of them braced themselves against the wall.


IT WASN'T ME!!
I NEVER TOUCHED HER!!

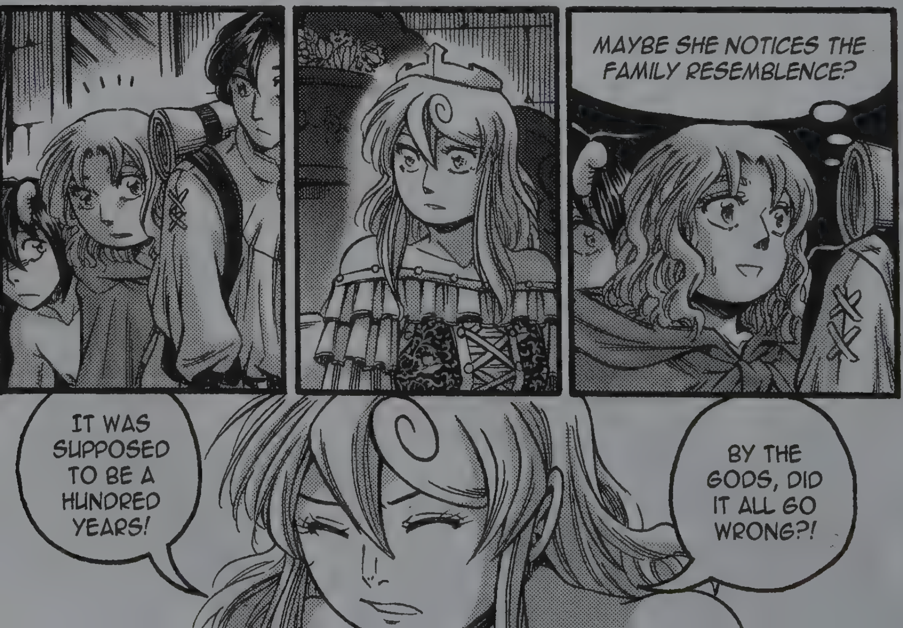

!
...WHAT YEAR IS IT?
HUH?
I SAID: WHAT YEAR IS IT?


IT'S... IT'S 971 CE.

It seemed an eternity before the queen spoke again. She looked stunned; her complexion was pale, and she swayed from side to side as she sat. Her eyes, in particular, seemed filled with confusion. They roved about the room in an unfocused fashion, as if trying to find a single object to lay anchorage to.

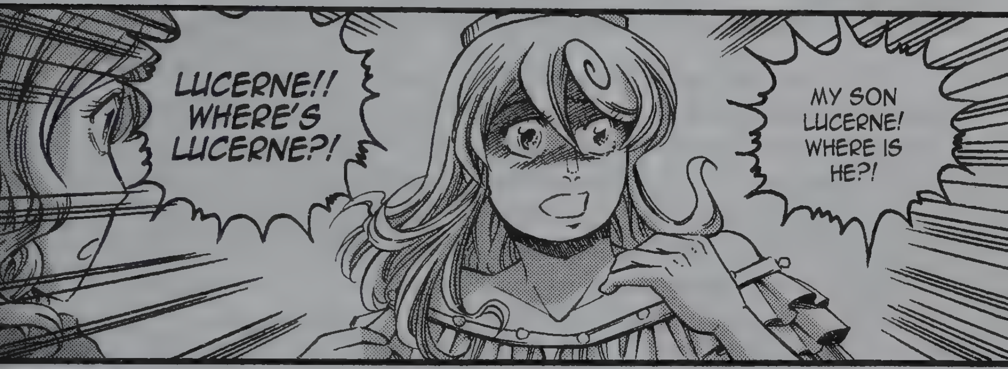
'It's only been sixty years,' she eventually said, with a mixture of shock, defeat and dismay.

The three of them stood rooted to the spot, no less confounded by the unfolding situation. Suddenly, queen's head swivelled their direction, the bewilderment in her eyes gone. Her eyes then narrowed, searching each one of them before locking onto Celsia's startled face.


MAYBE SHE NOTICES THE FAMILY RESEMBLENCE?
IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A HUNDRED YEARS!
BY THE GODS, DID IT ALL GO WRONG?!

With difficulty, the queen pulled herself to her feet. Immediately, she staggered, one hand rubbing at her temples as she struggled to maintain her balance.

Celsia rushed forward to help. Her healer's instincts told her that it was probably stagnant blood, bad humours that needed to be released from the body after a prolonged bout of lying prone. A bit of blood-letting should help, but she stopped when the queen stiffened and gave a startled cry.

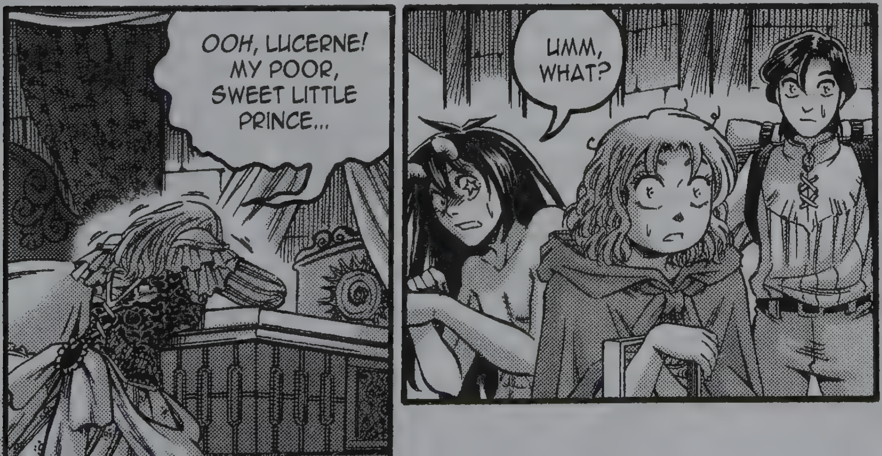

MY SON LUCERNE! WHERE IS HE?!
LUCERNE!! WHERE'S LUCERNE?!

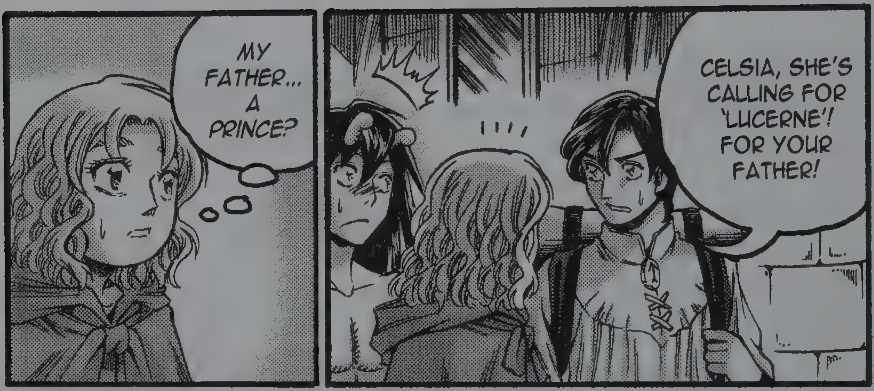
Lucerne?

Celsia's heart skipped a beat at the mention of her father's name. If she had doubts before, then she had fewer now.

The queen hurried to a lavishly decorated red and gold crib beside her bed, and frantically started to search it. When it was clear that there was no infant, she started to look wildly around the room. She took a few steps and then stopped, giving a gasp of realisation.

Everyone froze in anticipation, but the queen only headed back to the crib. She gazed helplessly at the pile of cushions and blankets for a moment, before slowly sinking to her knees. Then unexpectedly, she started to cry.

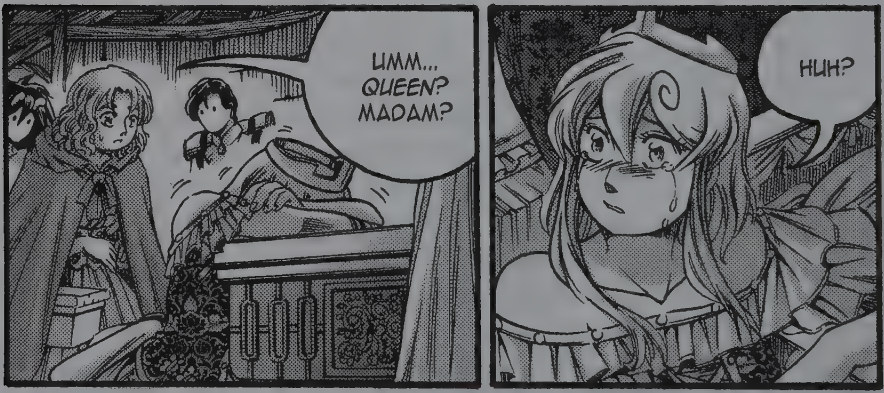

UMM, WHAT?
OOH, LUCERNE! MY POOR, SWEET LITTLE PRINCE...


MY FATHER... A PRINCE?
!!!!
CELSIA, SHE'S CALLING FOR 'LUCERNE'! FOR YOUR FATHER!

'*Please* go to her and let her know who you are, to give her some comfort.' Quillon said, sounding quite distressed by the queen's pain. 'A mother should never be separated from her children.'

'I agree,' said Pylus. Celsia turned to him in surprise, and he grimaced at the look on her face. Whatever fear of the '*Black Queen*' he had felt earlier seemed to have dissipated. 'I know I've said some things, but...' He paused, and made a hapless gesture. 'She's just a woman who wants her son. I can't abide the wailing of women.'

Celsia took a deep breath, and nodded. She approached the queen.


UMM... QUEEN? MADAM?
HUH?

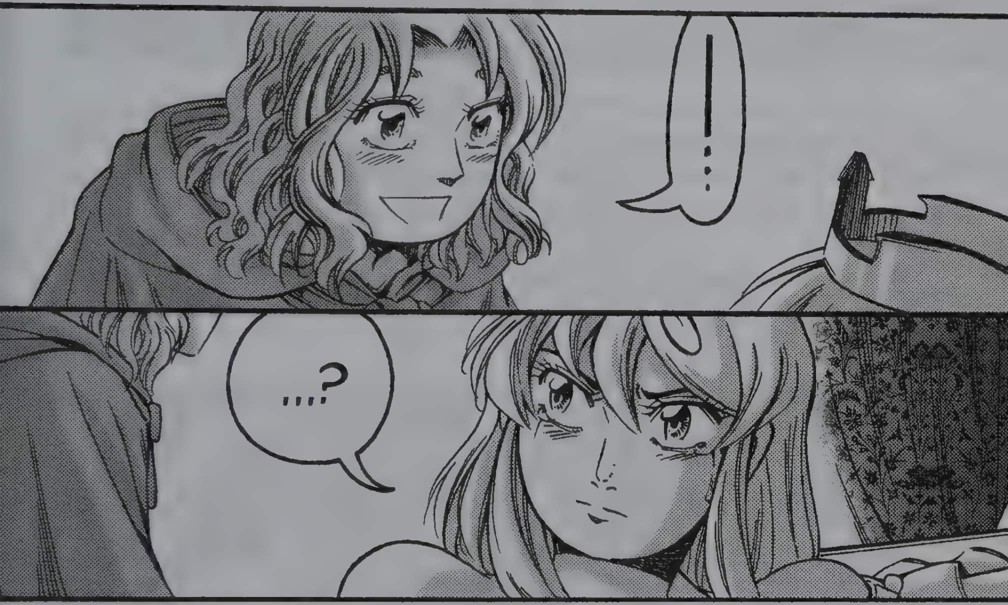
Celsia gave a silent inhalation of surprise. She was looking into a mirror. The queen's tears had softened her features, and Celsia immediately saw the same big, dewy eyes, reddened cheeks and and squished nose that was her own face whenever she cried.

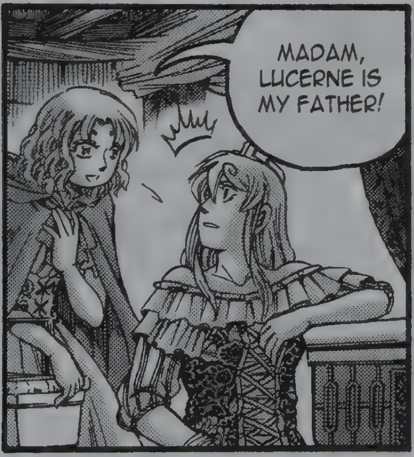
This is my true born Grandmother, Celsia thought in wonder. *My true blood relative! It's really true! My* real *grandmother!*

It was a revelation, and a novelty. What was etched on the queen's face was proof, a living bond forged by the waters of the womb. It bore the traces of a bloodline, one that echoed through the successive generations and which asserted itself onto the faces of its members.

As a child, Celsia had occasionally sought some semblence to her own visage in her healer grandmother's face, only to be ultimately disappointed. But now, she finally had someone who carried all the signs of familial belonging through their physical appearance alone.

It's me! She's just like me! she thought. It was exciting; *enthralling*, even. It made her feel an instant closeness with the queen.




MADAM, LUCERNE IS MY FATHER!

'...What?' said the queen.

'I said: Lucerne is my father. I am your granddaughter, Celsia.'

'*What*?' There was a moment of stunned silence. 'How can that be? Lucerne has only just celebrated his first name day!'

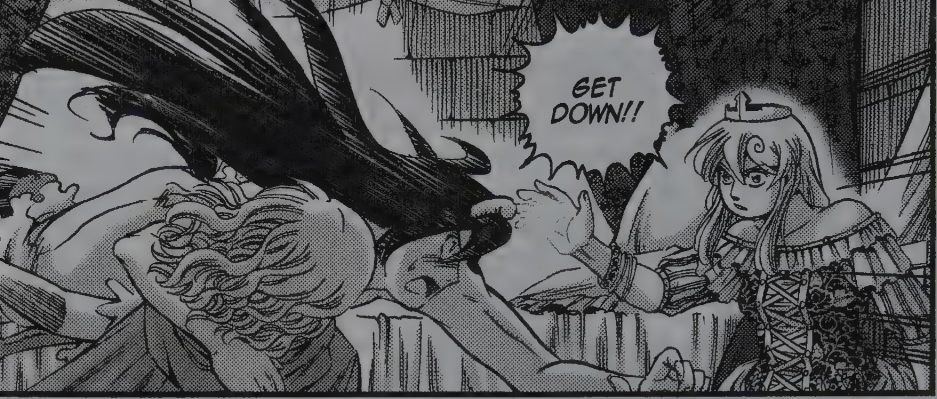
'That's because sixty years—'

'*Who sent you?*' The queen's voice now throbbed low with rage. Her eyes narrowed, filling with suspicion. 'Was it Andal?'

'*Andal*? Who's Andal?' Celsia replied, blinking in bafflement.

Without warning, the queen lifted her hand. A crackle of heat formed in the centre of her palm.

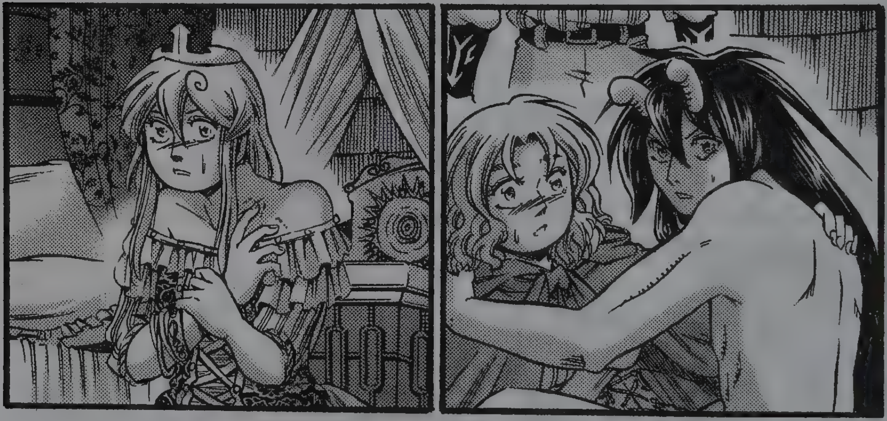
'Look out!'



One moment, Celsia was looking at her grandmother's hand. The next, she was hurtling through the air. Pylus held her in a grip of iron, his mass of hair completely blocking her field of vision. They landed on the floor a few feet away, knocking all the breath from her.

SNAP!

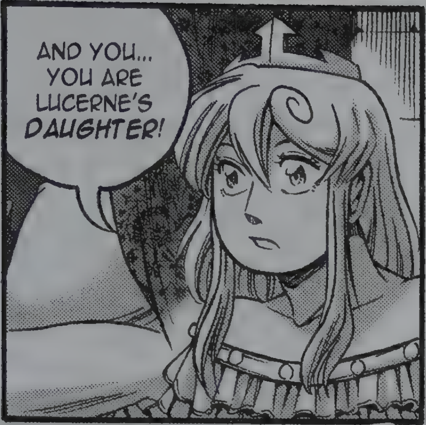
There was a flash of yellow light. Celsia recovered just in time to see the queen retract her hand, recoiling as if something had reached out and struck her.



The queen slowly ran a hand through her own hair. She then stared long and hard at the faun and the girl with her own face who were sitting in a tangled heap before her. She looked as if she was seeing them—*truly* seeing them—for the first time, and Celsia thought she saw a flash of recognition, even fear, when Pylus came under her scrutiny. She, meanwhile, clutched her hamper in apprehension, holding it under her chin like a shield.

After a lengthy silence, the queen's shoulders relaxed. She seemed deep in thought, her brows knitted together, and when she finally spoke, the earlier tension had faded.

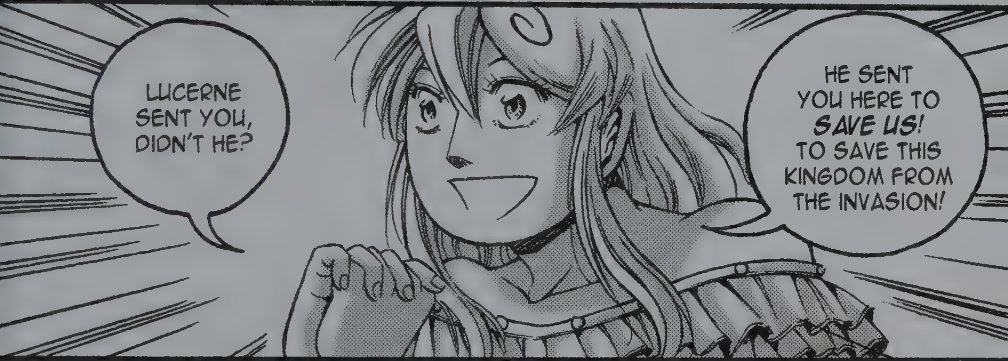
'It really *has* been sixty years,' she murmured. She was now looking at Celsia with eyes full of wonder.


AND YOU... YOU ARE LUCERNE'S *DAUGHTER!*

'Celosia. You said your name was Celosia, child?'

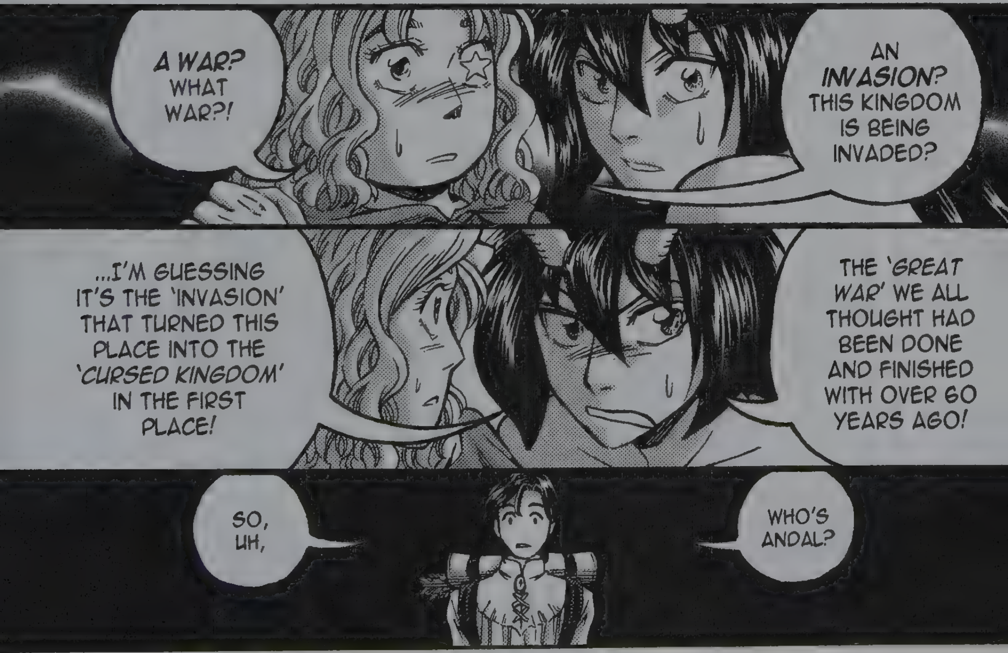
Celsia.

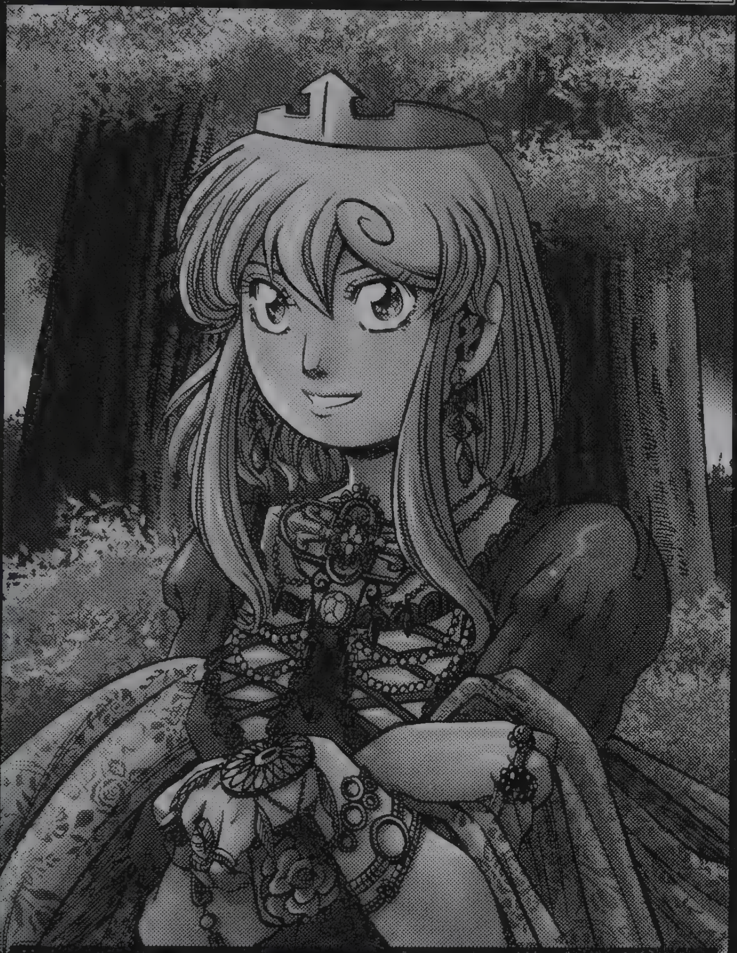
Celsia warily chose to remain silent, but the queen seemed untroubled by the lack of response. Instead, she leapt to her feet, clapping her hands in girlish glee. A radiant smile spread across her face, and her eyes lit up like two beacons.


LUCERNE SENT YOU, DIDN'T HE?
HE SENT YOU HERE TO *SAVE US!* TO SAVE THIS KINGDOM FROM THE INVASION!

'Uh, *no*,' Celsia blurted. It was instantly regretted. The word dropped like a stone, straight through the queen's buoyant mood.

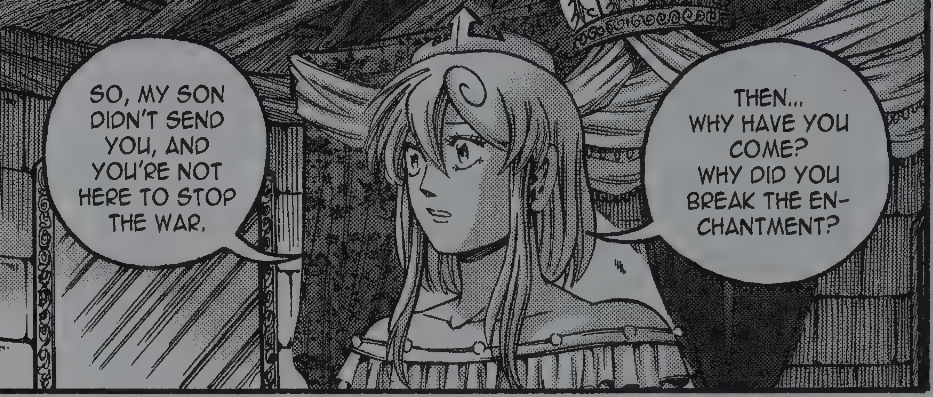
'You're not here to save Fallinor? To save us from the war?'


A WAR? WHAT WAR?!
AN *INVASION?* THIS KINGDOM IS BEING INVADED?
...I'M GUESSING IT'S THE 'INVASION' THAT TURNED THIS PLACE INTO THE *'CURSED KINGDOM'* IN THE FIRST PLACE!
THE *'GREAT WAR'* WE ALL THOUGHT HAD BEEN DONE AND FINISHED WITH OVER 60 YEARS AGO!
SO, UH,
WHO'S ANDAL?



7: THE WAR

BY QUEENIE CHAN

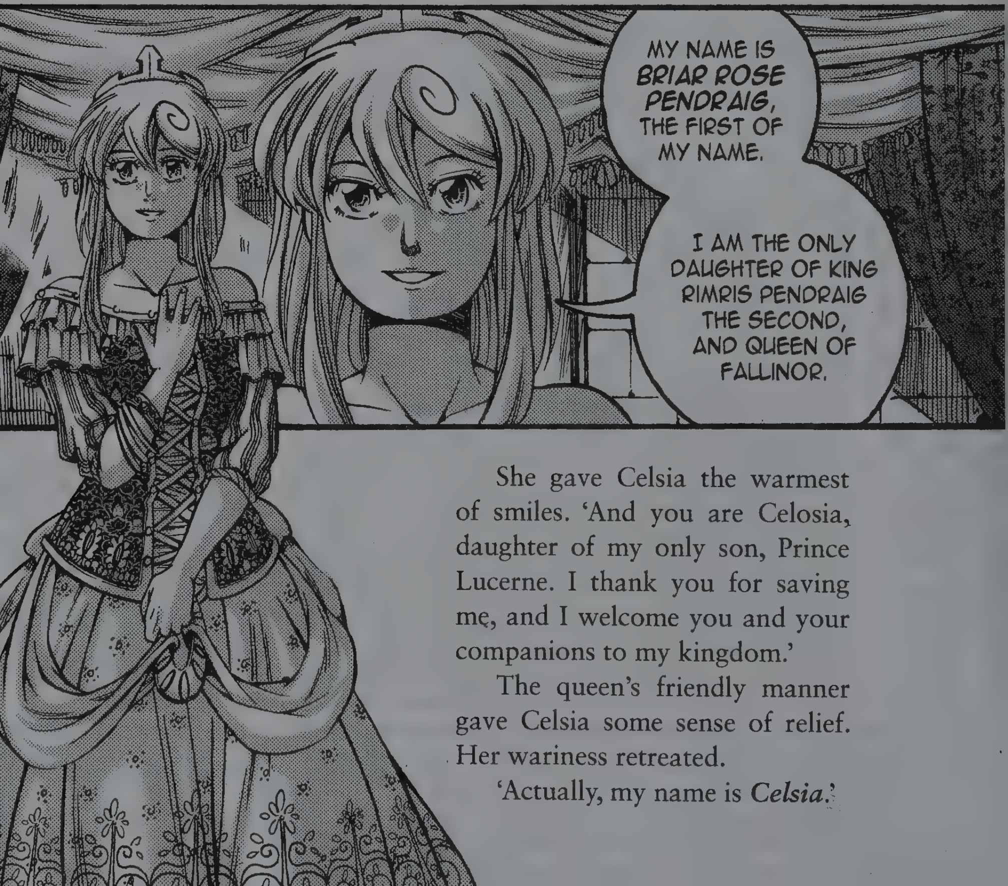

SO, MY SON DIDN'T SEND YOU, AND YOU'RE NOT HERE TO STOP THE WAR.
THEN... WHY HAVE YOU COME? WHY DID YOU BREAK THE ENCHANTMENT?

Celsia blinked in confusion. This was certainly unexpected.

Silence ruled the room. They were all looking at her expectantly, and she became wary and self-conscious. For her, there were still too many unanswered questions at this stage to reveal her full story, at least to a complete stranger.

'I... I thought... but I didn't even...'

Several moments passed before the queen interrupted. 'I see. Perhaps I am being too hasty. You must have come from afar to free me and my kingdom, and yet, I've not even introduced myself.'


MY NAME IS ***BRIAR ROSE PENDRAIG***, THE FIRST OF MY NAME.
I AM THE ONLY DAUGHTER OF KING RIMRIS PENDRAIG THE SECOND, AND QUEEN OF FALLINOR.

She gave Celsia the warmest of smiles. 'And you are Celosia, daughter of my only son, Prince Lucerne. I thank you for saving me, and I welcome you and your companions to my kingdom.'

The queen's friendly manner gave Celsia some sense of relief. Her wariness retreated.

'Actually, my name is *Celsia*.'

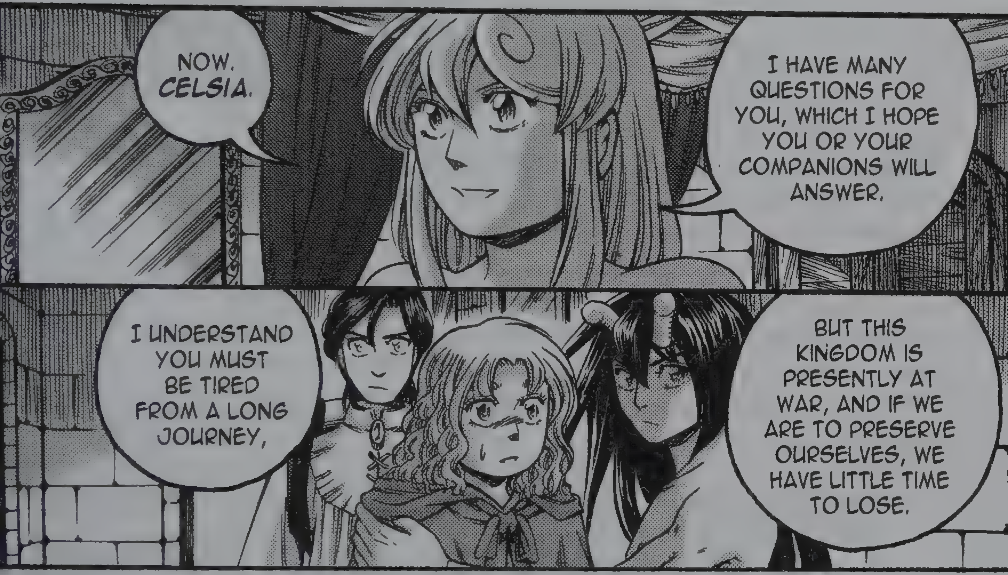
Briar Rose frowned. She mouthed the name as if it was a foreign word, before drawing her lips together into a thin line.

'Your grace,' she said.

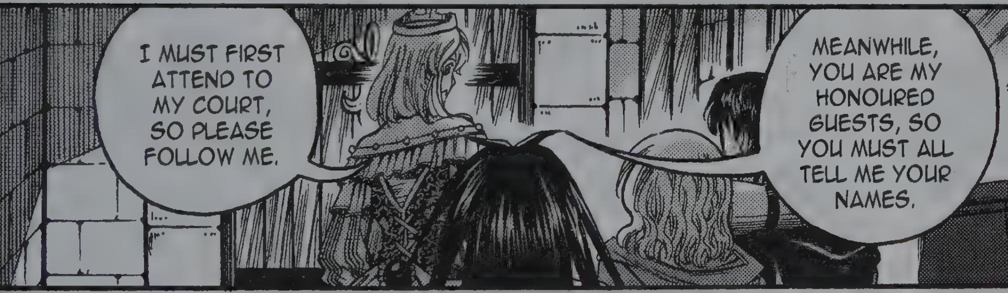
Celsia blinked. 'Uh... I'm sorry?'

'You are to address me as '*your grace*,' little dove,' Briar Rose said. Her voice was gentle, but firm. 'I am queen, and that is how you address me when you are in my presence.'

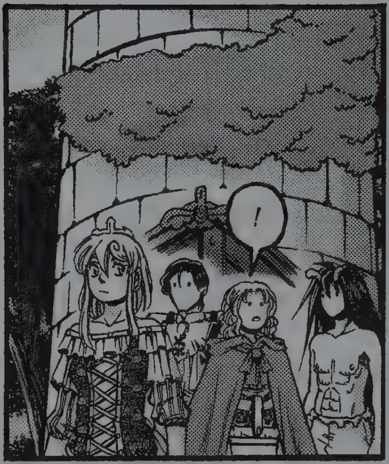
'Yes... *your grace*,' Celsia murmured. Briar Rose gave a slight nod of her head, a pleased expression her face.


NOW. *CELSIA*.
I HAVE MANY QUESTIONS FOR YOU, WHICH I HOPE YOU OR YOUR COMPANIONS WILL ANSWER.
I UNDERSTAND YOU MUST BE TIRED FROM A LONG JOURNEY,
BUT THIS KINGDOM IS PRESENTLY AT WAR, AND IF WE ARE TO PRESERVE OURSELVES, WE HAVE LITTLE TIME TO LOSE.

With that, Briar Rose walked past them in swish of silk. As she approached the door, she turned and beckoned to them.


I MUST FIRST ATTEND TO MY COURT, SO PLEASE FOLLOW ME.
MEANWHILE, YOU ARE MY HONOURED GUESTS, SO YOU MUST ALL TELL ME YOUR NAMES.

'I'm Quillon,' said Quillon. It was after a lengthy, almost reluctant silence, and he hastily added '*your grace*' afterwards. Pylus's self-introduction sounded much smoother, almost sycophantic.



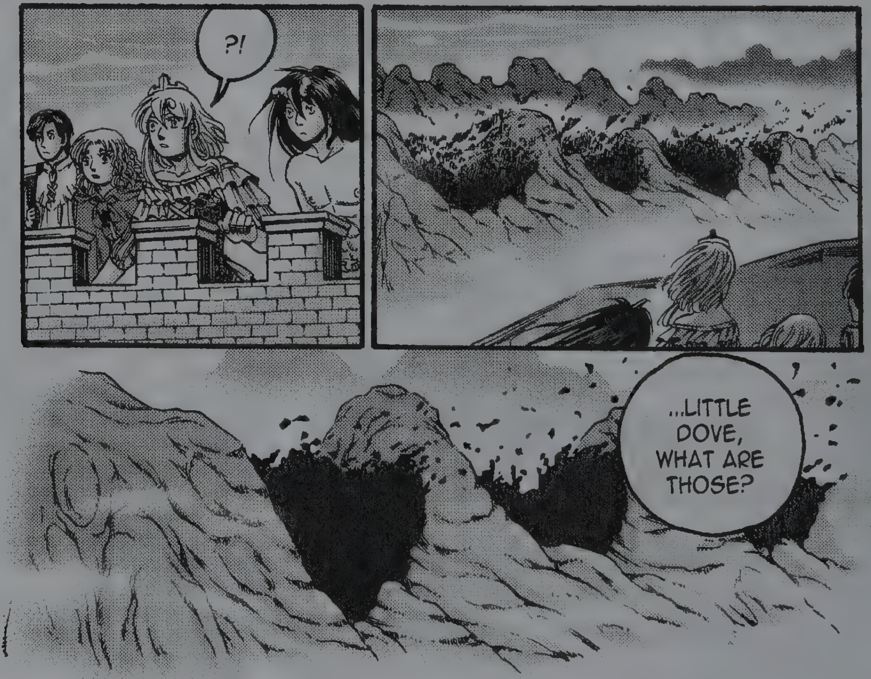
They followed close on Briar Rose's heels, as the queen hurried from her bedroom and down the winding flight of stairs. She quickly slipped outside when she reached the bottom of the tower, and when the three of them did the same, they stopped and gave a cry of surprise.

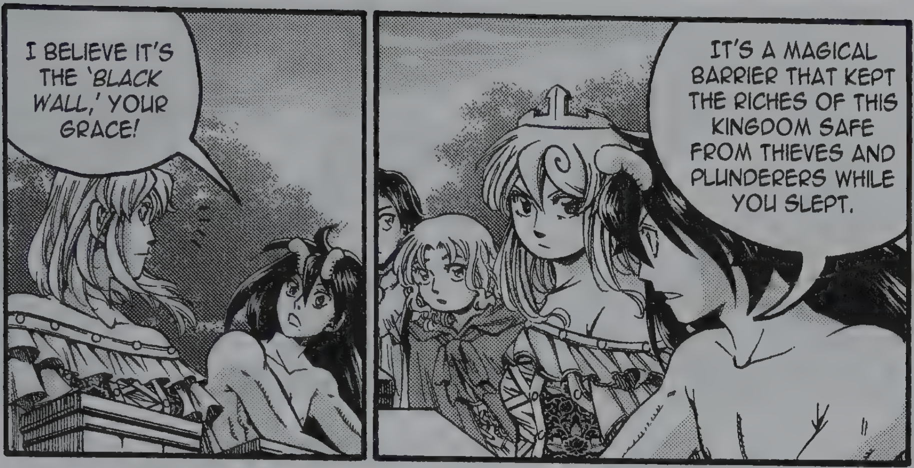
'What is it, children?' Briar Rose said, turning to them with an inquisitive look.

'The fog. It's completely cleared!' Celsia replied in wonder. 'Uh, *your grace*. When we first entered the kingdom and scaled the castle walls, the air was thick with dust. But now...' Now, when she looked around, she could still see dust on the tiled floor of the rooftop garden, but the sky overhead was a piercing blue. The air was clear and even crisp, with a hint of the dewy fragrances of trees and bushes.

'I see,' Briar Rose said thoughtfully. 'Come, little dove. Show me where and how you entered this palace.'

When they returned to the parapets, the whole party gave a collective gasp.


?!
...LITTLE DOVE, WHAT ARE THOSE?

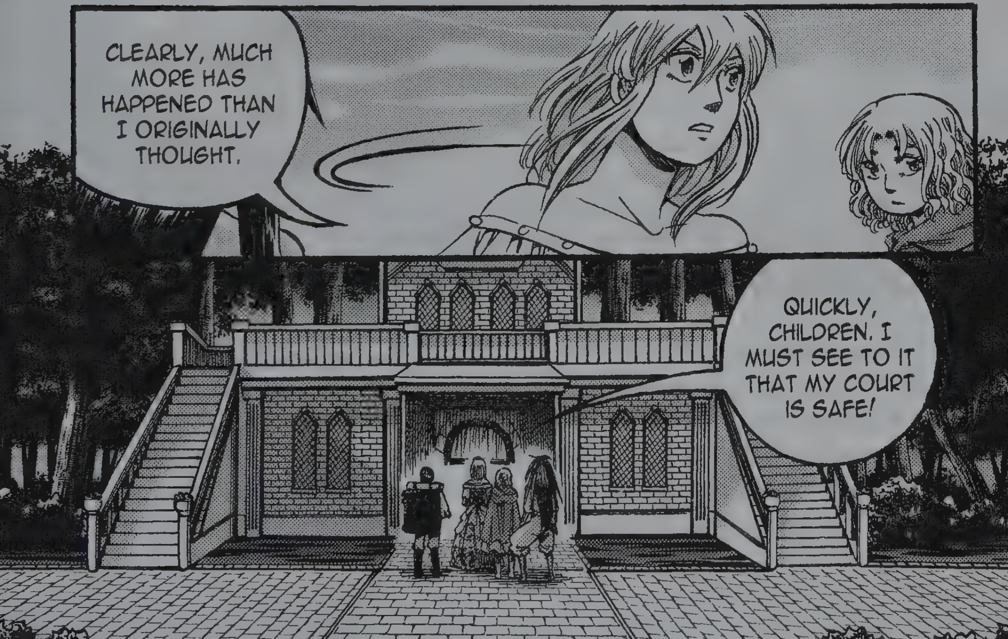

I BELIEVE IT'S THE '*BLACK WALL*,' YOUR GRACE!
IT'S A MAGICAL BARRIER THAT KEPT THE RICHES OF THIS KINGDOM SAFE FROM THIEVES AND PLUNDERERS WHILE YOU SLEPT.

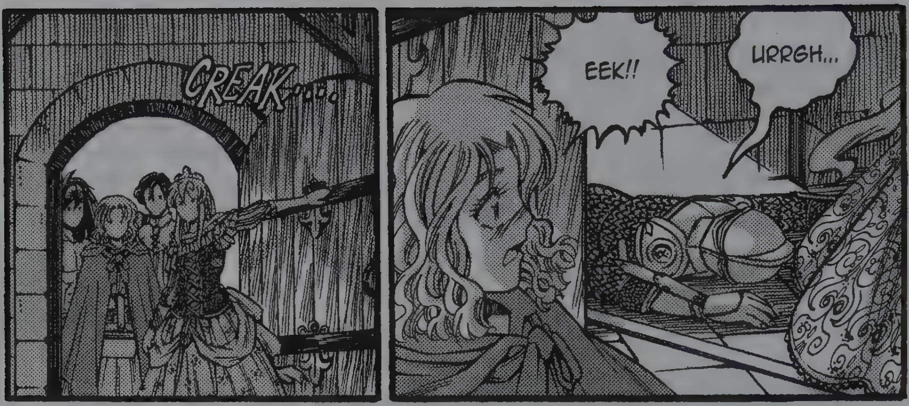
'With the spell broken, I believe these barriers will vanish.'

Indeed, the wall of vines that was so frightening and impenetrable earlier seemed to be withering away as they spoke. It was crumbling with each gust of wind, with small, flaky chunks of black being carried off into the distance.

'I see. Thank you, young faun,' said Briar Rose, to which Pylus reacted with a surprisingly understated bow. Celsia rolled her eyes at him, feeling a twinge of irritation, and even unease.

He certainly wastes no time, she thought. She trusted him, but his behaviour brought back unpleasant memories of a Gingerbread house, complete with all those stomach-turning smells she had tried so hard to forget. She cast a nervous glance at Quillon, who said nothing.

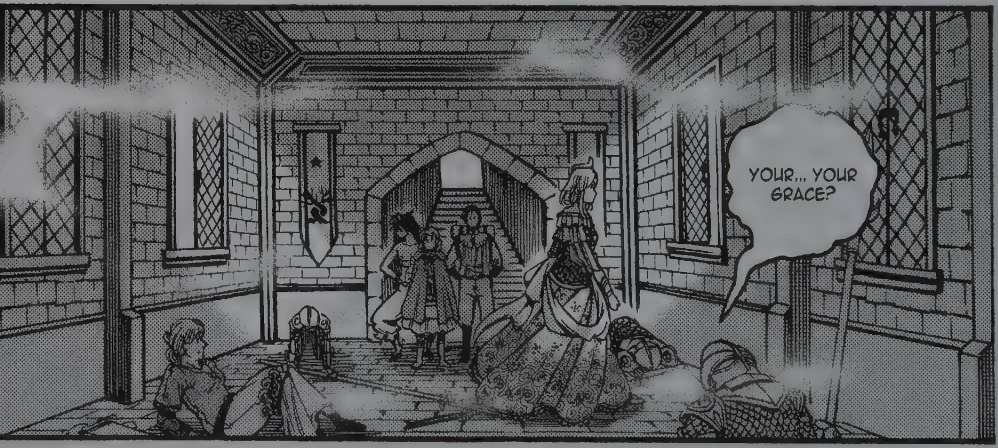

CLEARLY, MUCH MORE HAS HAPPENED THAN I ORIGINALLY THOUGHT.
QUICKLY, CHILDREN. I MUST SEE TO IT THAT MY COURT IS SAFE!


CREAK...
EEK!!
URRGH...

Something thrashed to the side of the door, emitting a long, low groan. Celsia leapt backwards, colliding with a lean, hard body that reached out to steady her.

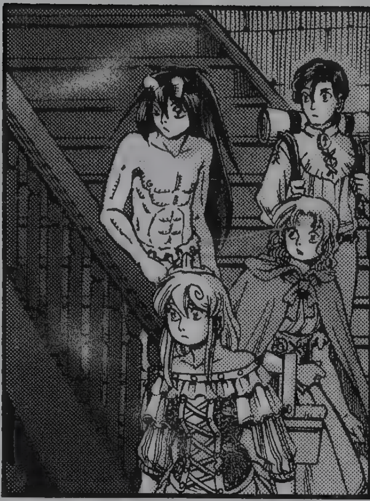
'It's just a guard being caught taking the longest nap *ever* during his shift,' Pylus hissed at her side. His tone sounded slightly mocking, and she resisted the urge to elbow him. 'The queen will *love* that.'

Briar Rose barely spared the guard a glance. The inside of the castle was still dark with dust, though the wind flowing through the open door was quickly clearing it. The queen walked over to the windows, stepping over several stirring bodies as she flung them open one by one. The corridor was soon filled with light.

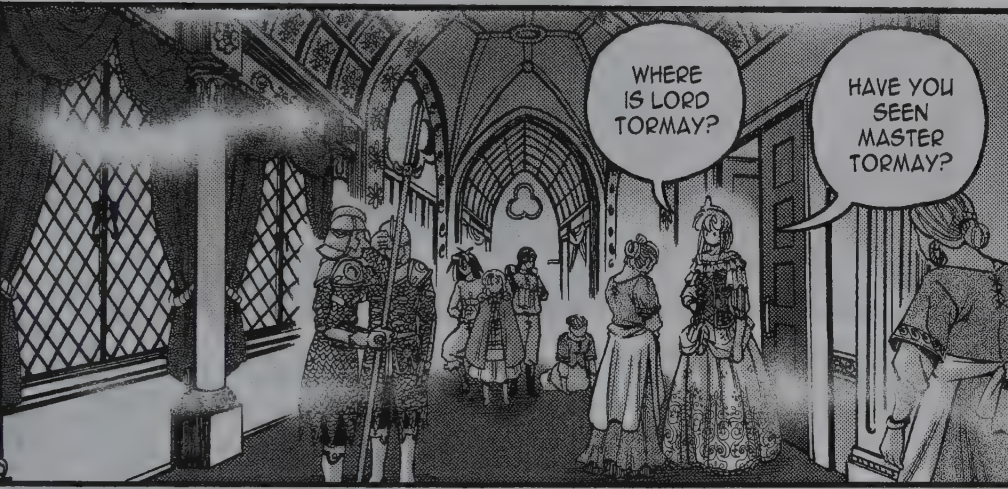

YOUR... YOUR GRACE?

Several bodies covered in a thin layer of dust were now sitting up, revealing them to be either chainmail-clad guards with pikes, or serving maids in their aprons. When one of the maids saw the queen, she screamed and tried to cover the tray of smashed porcelain cups on the floor next to her. She cowered prostrate on the ground, but Briar Rose ignored her, beckoning only to Celsia and the others.

More doors opened into more corridors, each more opulent than the last. Celsia and Quillon soon found themselves gawking at the lavishly decorated cornices and elaborate wall hangings.



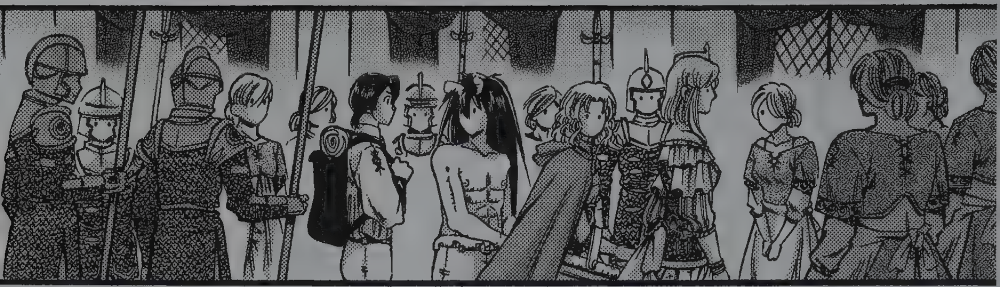
As more windows were opened, sunlight streamed into the palace, lighting up the rich red carpeting and the hallways lined with statues and paintings. Everywhere, guards and servants stirred; swaying, they rose slowly to their feet from where they fell over sixty years ago.


HAVE YOU SEEN MASTER TORMAY?
WHERE IS LORD TORMAY?

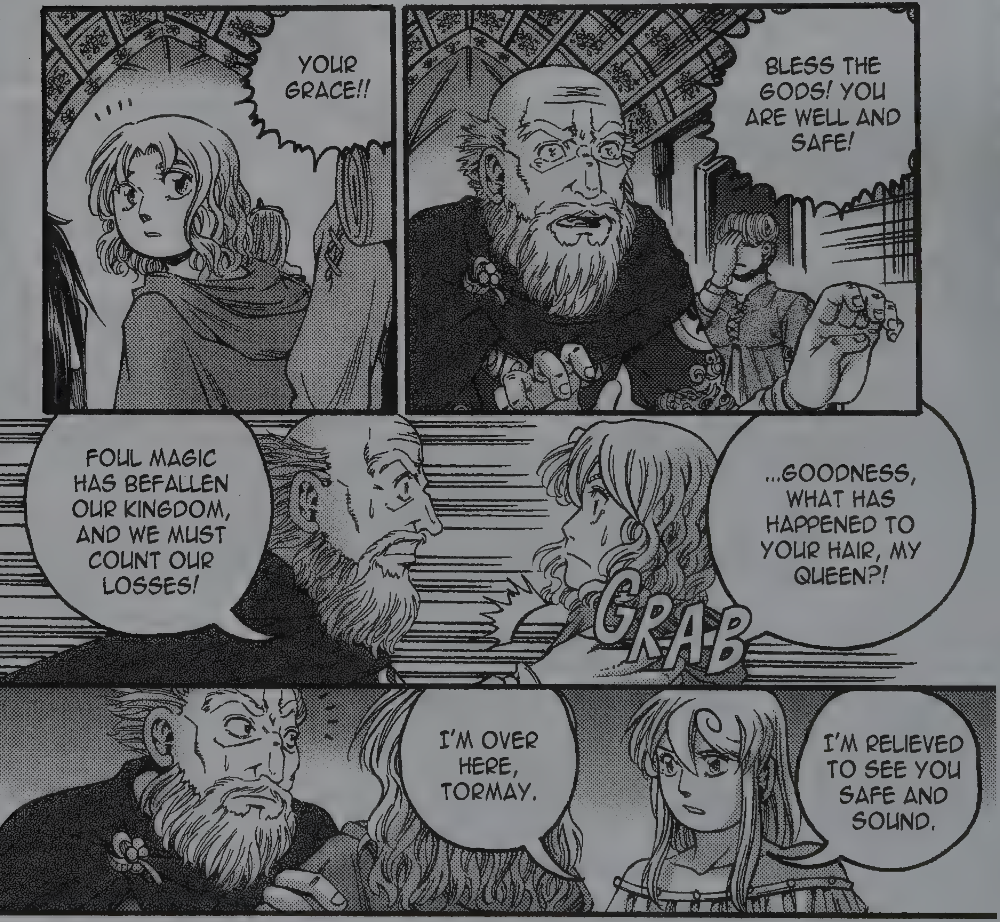
Celsia could not help but feel sorry for these poor souls. They looked bewildered, as dazed as the queen had been when she first woke, though they still had the presence of mind to snap to attention when Briar Rose approached them. Most of them could only answer her with a mumbled '*No, your grace.*'

The rooms and corridors were soon filled with guards and servants shuffling around aimlessly. They moved aside to let Briar Rose through with respectful bows, though Celsia noted with alarm that all their eyes were now fixated on one person—her. Everyone they passed, whether male or female, servant or guard, stared first at the queen, then at her, then back to the queen again.

The entire palace will be whispering about me soon, she thought in alarm. The populace outside would know of her, too.

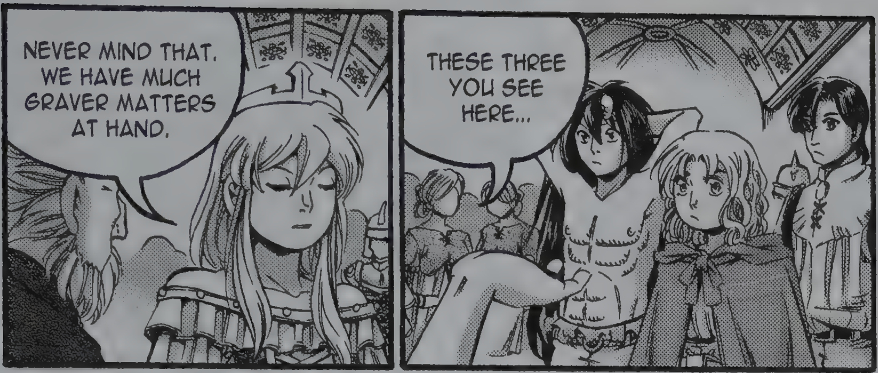


A train of servants and guards were now following them through the palace. Furtive glances and whispers filled the air, until they arrived at an intersection. A dark shape darted out from a doorway.

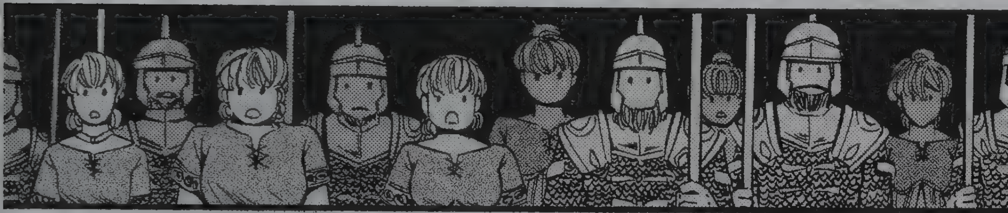

YOUR GRACE!!
BLESS THE GODS! YOU ARE WELL AND SAFE!
FOUL MAGIC HAS BEFALLEN OUR KINGDOM, AND WE MUST COUNT OUR LOSSES!
...GOODNESS, WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOUR HAIR, MY QUEEN?!
GRAB
I'M OVER HERE, TORMAY.
I'M RELIEVED TO SEE YOU SAFE AND SOUND.

Tormay stared. His eyes, red-rimmed and rheumy, bulged as he took a long, hard look at Celsia before turning to Briar Rose.

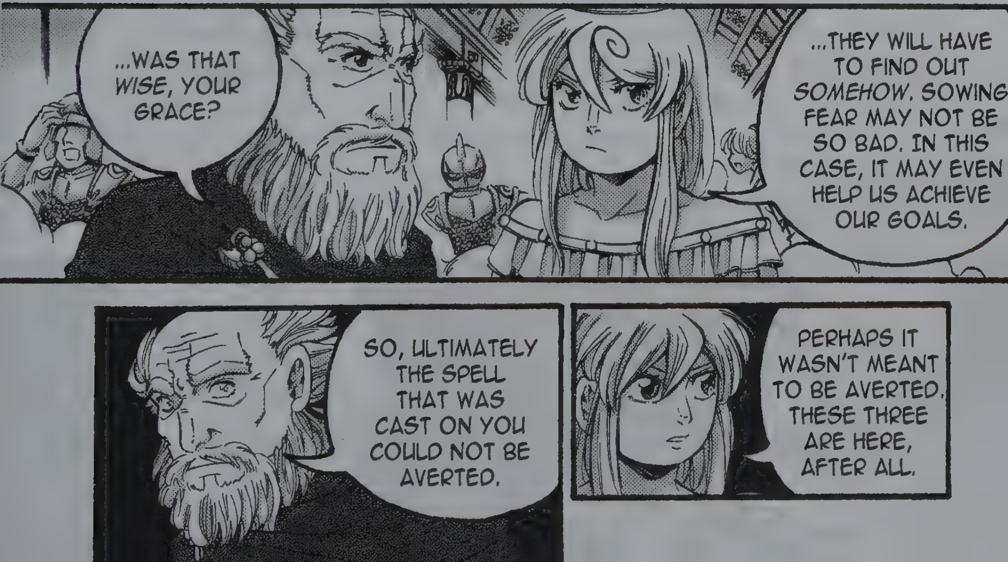
'Goodness, what *has* happened to your hair, my queen?!'

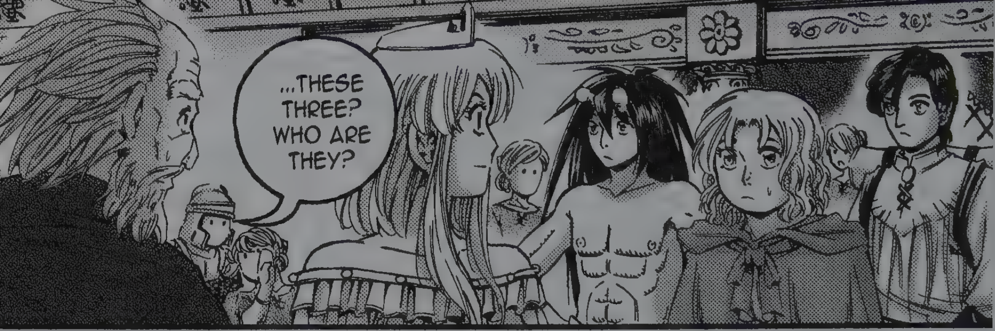

NEVER MIND THAT. WE HAVE MUCH GRAVER MATTERS AT HAND.
THESE THREE YOU SEE HERE...

'...have just released us from a most frightful spell, one that has caused our entire kingdom to fall into enchanted sleep. Luckily, the spell is broken, but it is now the year 971 CE. We have been asleep for *sixty years*.'



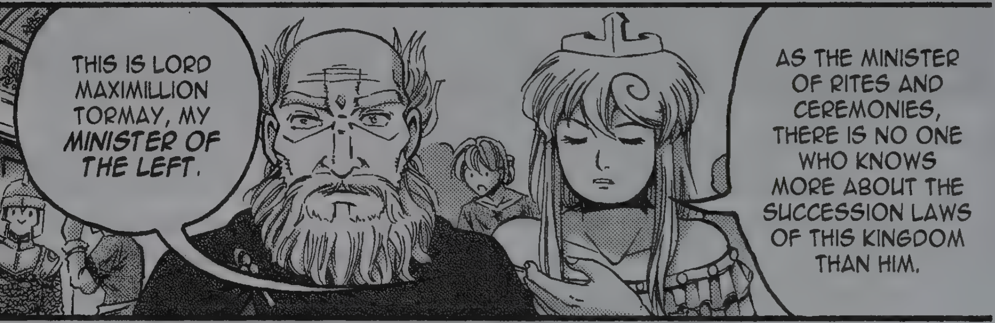
You could have heard a pin drop in the room. The stunned silence stretched on, as Briar Rose's words slowly sank into all the people assembled around them. A swell of murmuring then began, which quickly grew into a flurry of panicked shouts and screams. Servants and guards alike started rushing about, some running off altogether to spread the news through the palace.


...WAS THAT *WISE*, YOUR GRACE?
...THEY WILL HAVE TO FIND OUT *SOMEHOW*. SOWING FEAR MAY NOT BE SO BAD. IN THIS CASE, IT MAY EVEN HELP US ACHIEVE OUR GOALS.
SO, ULTIMATELY THE SPELL THAT WAS CAST ON YOU COULD NOT BE AVERTED.
PERHAPS IT WASN'T MEANT TO BE AVERTED. THESE THREE ARE HERE, AFTER ALL.


...THESE THREE? WHO ARE THEY?

Tormay's skin was tanned and weathered, but his posture still bore strength. His clothing was refined but a simple dark blue, with a silver clasp studded with emeralds being the only other spot of colour on him. He had to squint to inspect Quillon and Celsia's faces though, and Celsia winced when she saw his brow wrinkling at the gold and silver streaks in her hair. It was Pylus, however, that he recoiled from the most. He looked the faun up and down like he had just stumbled up uninvited from the stables.

Pylus was all too happy to return the behaviour. He mimicked Tormay's mannerisms, even pointing a finger as he did.


AS THE MINISTER OF RITES AND CEREMONIES, THERE IS NO ONE WHO KNOWS MORE ABOUT THE SUCCESSION LAWS OF THIS KINGDOM THAN HIM.
THIS IS LORD MAXIMILLION TORMAY, MY *MINISTER OF THE LEFT*.

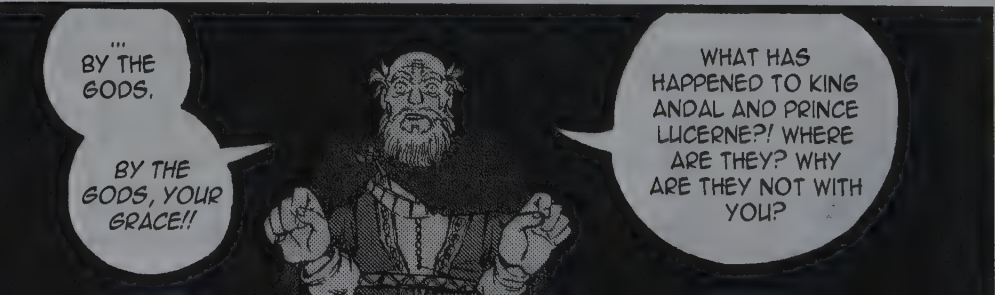
'Hello, children,' said Tormay, sounding barely interested.

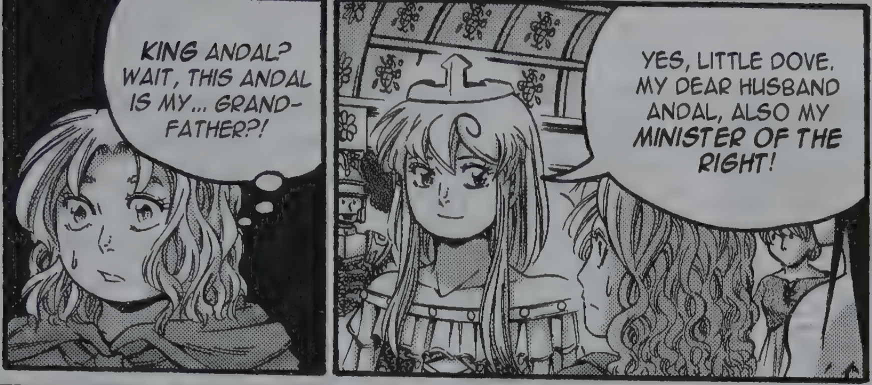
'This lovely girl here is Celsia,' Briar Rose said, walking forward and taking Celsia's hand in hers. 'She claims to be my granddaughter. The daughter of Prince Lucerne, in fact.'

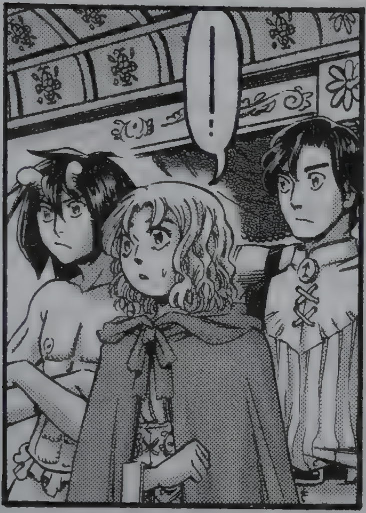
'...What?' There was a ripple of confusion on Tormay's face.

'Sixty years have passed, Tormay.'

The slowly-dawning look of horror on his face was almost comical.

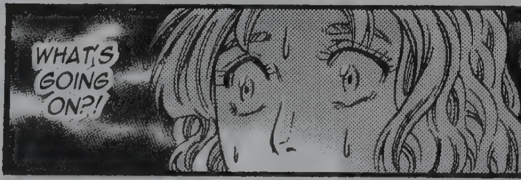

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO KING ANDAL AND PRINCE LUCERNE?! WHERE ARE THEY? WHY ARE THEY NOT WITH YOU?
... BY THE GODS.
BY THE GODS, YOUR GRACE!!


KING ANDAL? WAIT, THIS ANDAL IS MY... GRANDFATHER?!
YES, LITTLE DOVE. MY DEAR HUSBAND ANDAL, ALSO MY MINISTER OF THE RIGHT!



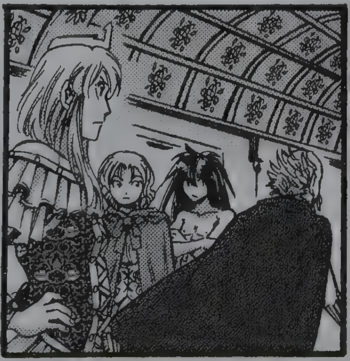
'It took me a while to remember, but I now recall that he luckily managed to escape the castle before the full effects of the enchantment took hold. He saved our infant son Lucerne in the process, and now, they have delivered you to me.'

Briar Rose gave an affectionate smile, while even Lord Tormay turned to look at her with new respect. Celsia's insides, however, churned with her rising panic.


WHAT'S GOING ON?!

That's not how it is at all! What have I gotten myself into?!

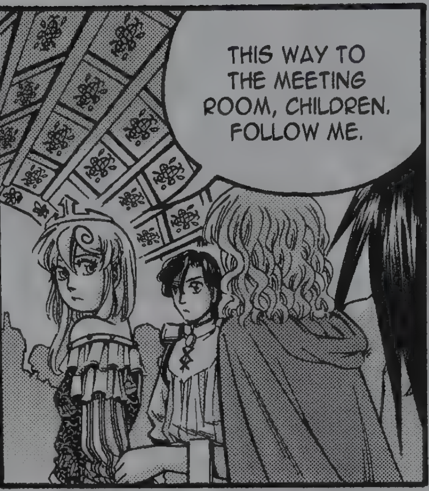
'Tormay,' Briar Rose said in an authoritative voice. 'Call the Fallene Council to the meeting room at once. The king is not present, but we shall need as many ministers as we can summon. Also, call Sir Warren of the City Guard. All city gates are to be closed, and an evening curfew to be enforced. The gates can only open on my orders.'



Tormay nodded. 'Shall I call the palace guards? I can have Sir Lansworth restore order to the palace in no time.'

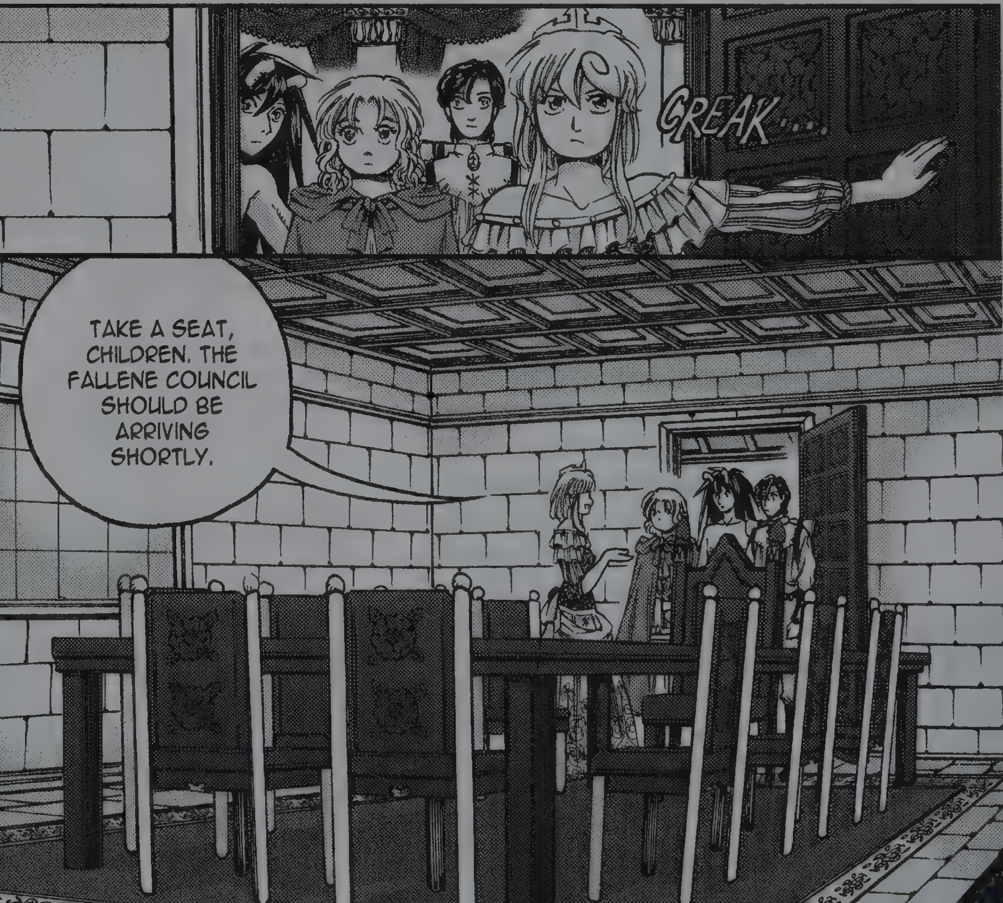
Briar Rose nodded. 'Yes. Have him raise the drawbridge too. After that, all men-at-arms are to assemble in the courtyard to await my orders.'

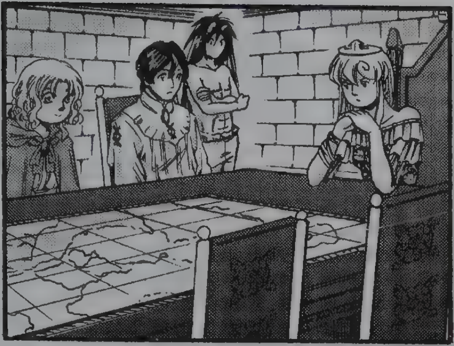
'Yes, your grace. I shall go immediately.' After a slight bow, Tormay turned and hurried away.


THIS WAY TO THE MEETING ROOM, CHILDREN. FOLLOW ME.

They followed the queen in silence. Everywhere they went, servants and guards gathered, pointing, gawking and whispering. Celsia could now hear phrases like '*Prince Lucerne's daughter*', '*the king fled*', '*sixty years*', '*enchanted sleep*', and '*spell broken*' being bandied about, which did nothing to soothe her nerves.

They continued down a grand staircase, reaching their destination in a long, cavernous hall lined with portraits. Many of them were intricately painted, depicting what must be kings and queens of centuries past. Briar Rose then paused in front of a small door carved out of rosewood.

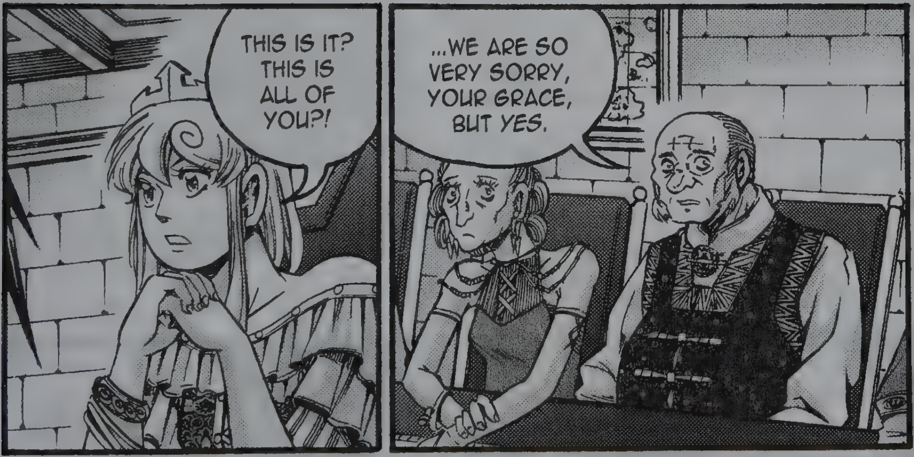

CREAK....
TAKE A SEAT, CHILDREN. THE FALLENE COUNCIL SHOULD BE ARRIVING SHORTLY.



Briar Rose took her seat at the head of the stable, while Celsia and Quillon awkwardly sidled into the nearest chairs. Pylus, however, stood silently in a corner, with his back to the wall. Celsia gave him a chiding look, but the queen ignored him. Briar Rose sat in silence, her hands clasped beneath her chin as she frowned at the map in the centre of the table.

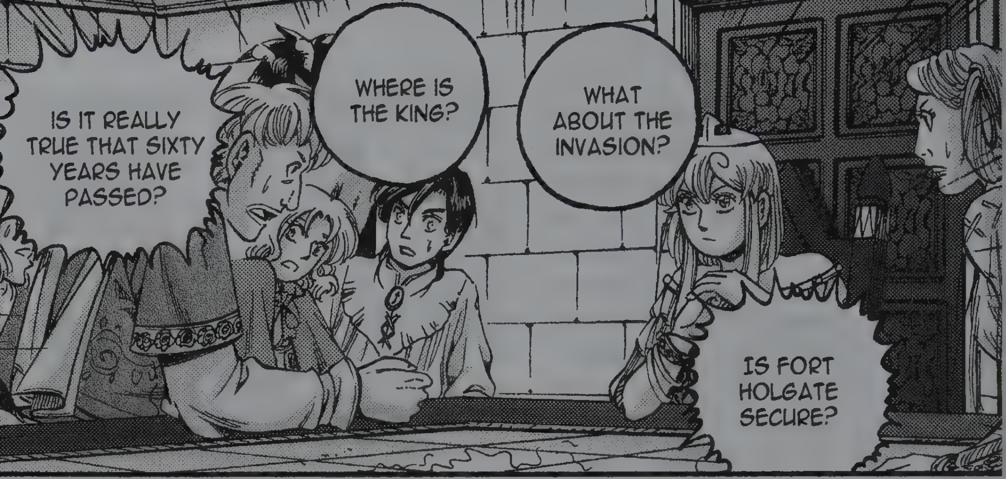
Celsia leaned forward to inspect the map. It was the first time she had seen such a large map of Fableton, especially one that was carved into the wood and inlaid with white marble. In the centre of the map was marked FALLINOR in large bold letters, surrounded by the Crescent Ranges. The kingdoms of WESTERWICK and ANATOLIA sat adjacent to the north, their borders shown by dotted brown lines.

After a while, a flurry of boot steps could be heard, muffled by the carpet of the corridor. A small group of tepid-looking noblemen and women then entered the room. Each of them dusted off their fine clothing and bowed stiffly to Briar Rose, before staggering into their chairs beside Celsia, seemingly exhausted.


THIS IS IT? THIS IS ALL OF YOU?!
...WE ARE SO VERY SORRY, YOUR GRACE, BUT *YES*.

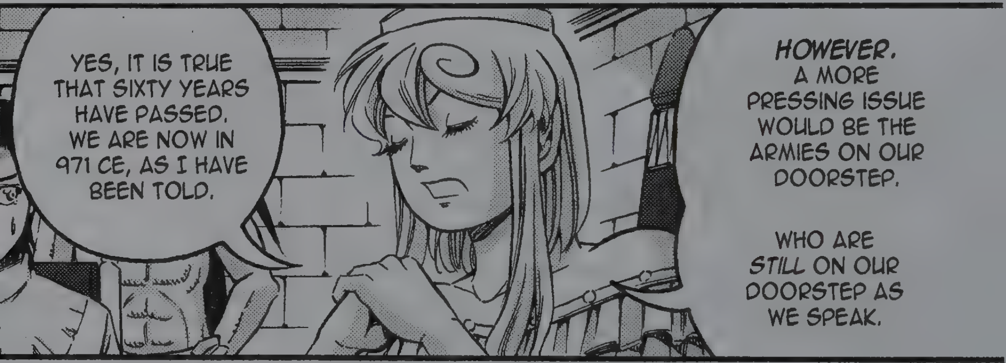
'It's the war, your grace. And now... this... this...' the councillor gave up with a sigh. 'Misfortune. This... *lost sixty years*.'

Suddenly, all the councillors in the room leapt to their feet.

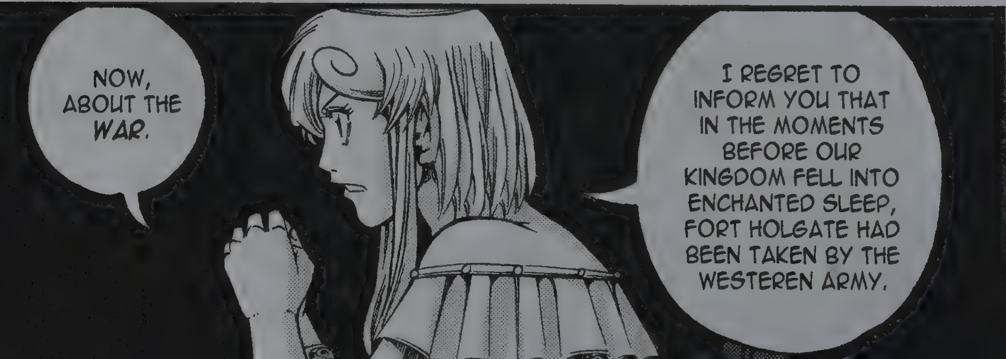

IS IT REALLY TRUE THAT SIXTY YEARS HAVE PASSED?
WHERE IS THE KING?
WHAT ABOUT THE INVASION?
IS FORT HOLGATE SECURE?

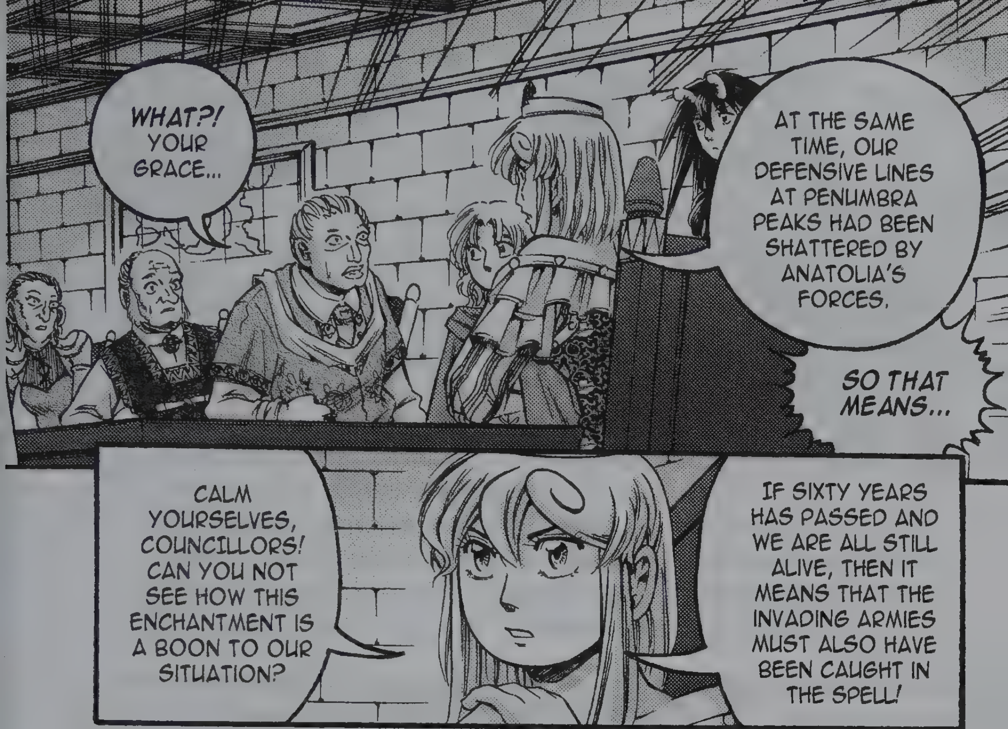
Briar Rose stayed silent during the barrage of questions, her face stony. The lords asking the questions looked anxious and uncertain, if not in an outright state of shock. Celsia cringed as she saw the fear and panic marring their faces. *Is this all my fault?*

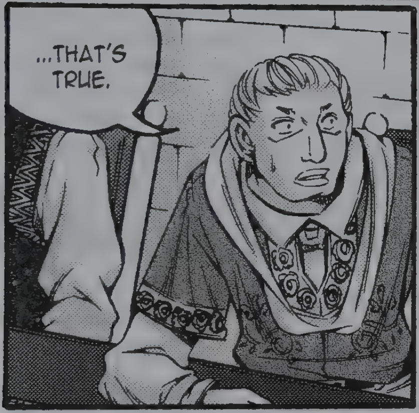
'Councillors, enough!'


YES, IT IS TRUE THAT SIXTY YEARS HAVE PASSED. WE ARE NOW IN 971 CE, AS I HAVE BEEN TOLD.
HOWEVER. A MORE PRESSING ISSUE WOULD BE THE ARMIES ON OUR DOORSTEP.
WHO ARE *STILL* ON OUR DOORSTEP AS WE SPEAK.

That seemed to quiet them down. They sank back down into their chairs, deep in thought, but oddly enough, also seemingly relieved to have their worst fears confirmed. Briar Rose then went on to explain the nature of their enchanted sleep, and also of the '*Black Wall*' surrounding Fallinor. The lords listened with rapt attention.

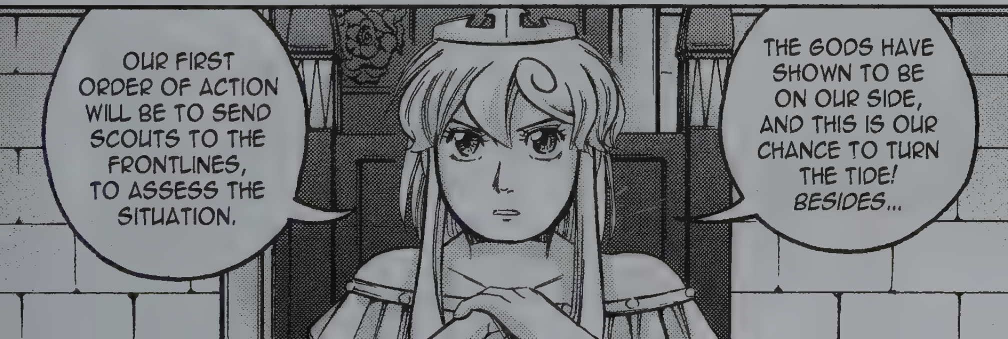

NOW, ABOUT THE *WAR*.
I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT IN THE MOMENTS BEFORE OUR KINGDOM FELL INTO ENCHANTED SLEEP, FORT HOLGATE HAD BEEN TAKEN BY THE WESTEREN ARMY.

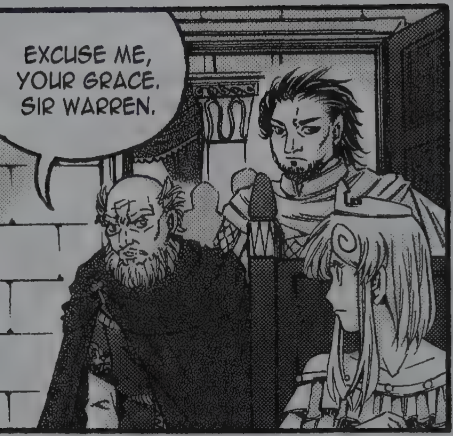

AT THE SAME TIME, OUR DEFENSIVE LINES AT PENUMBRA PEAKS HAD BEEN SHATTERED BY ANATOLIA'S FORCES.
SO THAT MEANS...
WHAT?! YOUR GRACE...
CALM YOURSELVES, COUNCILLORS! CAN YOU NOT SEE HOW THIS ENCHANTMENT IS A BOON TO OUR SITUATION?
IF SIXTY YEARS HAS PASSED AND WE ARE ALL STILL ALIVE, THEN IT MEANS THAT THE INVADING ARMIES MUST ALSO HAVE BEEN CAUGHT IN THE SPELL!



'Look around you, councillors,' Briar rose continued. 'Look at the dust that has collected undisturbed, the golden candleholders and ornaments of value that are still scattered about the palace. If anyone had been here during the time we were asleep, our throats would have been slit and we would have been thoroughly robbed. And yet here we are, not only alive, but still young, strong and healthy.'

The *young, strong and healthy* line seemed to have an effect. All the men straightened in their chairs, jutting out their chests.


OUR FIRST ORDER OF ACTION WILL BE TO SEND SCOUTS TO THE FRONTLINES, TO ASSESS THE SITUATION.
THE GODS HAVE SHOWN TO BE ON OUR SIDE, AND THIS IS OUR CHANCE TO TURN THE TIDE! BESIDES...


EXCUSE ME, YOUR GRACE. SIR WARREN.

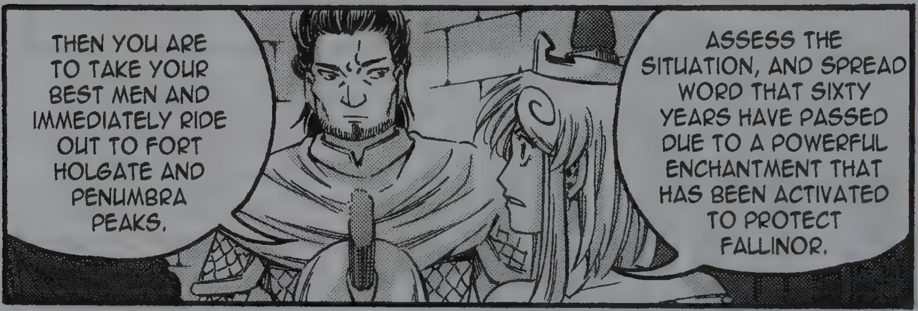
Lord Tormay entered, followed by a man dressed in scale mail and with a green and white cloak. He had his helmet removed, revealing a shock of jet black hair and a wide-set face with a strong jaw.

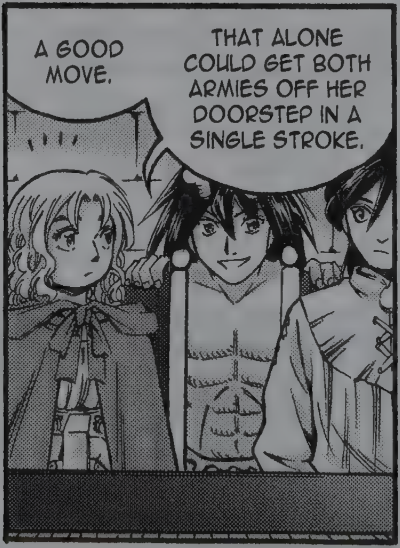
'Sir Janus Warren, at your service,' he barked, followed by a short bow.

'Excellent timing, Sir Warren,' said Briar Rose. 'I trust Lord Tormay has informed you of our present situation?'

Celsia noticed that the queen was actually addressing Lord Tormay, who gave the slightest of nods.

'Yes, your grace,' Warren replied.

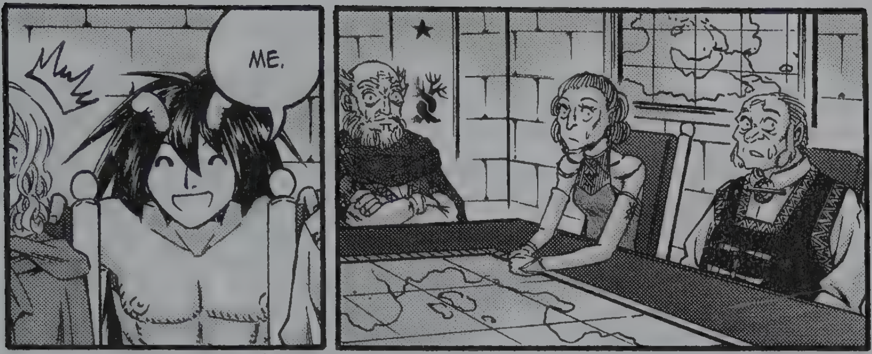

ASSESS THE SITUATION, AND SPREAD WORD THAT SIXTY YEARS HAVE PASSED DUE TO A POWERFUL ENCHANTMENT THAT HAS BEEN ACTIVATED TO PROTECT FALLINOR.
THEN YOU ARE TO TAKE YOUR BEST MEN AND IMMEDIATELY RIDE OUT TO FORT HOLGATE AND PENUMBRA PEAKS.


THAT ALONE COULD GET BOTH ARMIES OFF HER DOORSTEP IN A SINGLE STROKE.
A GOOD MOVE.

Celsia jumped as Pylus' warm breath brushed against her ears. She hadn't noticed him wedge himself between her and Quillon, and though he had whispered, it was loud enough for the queen to hear.

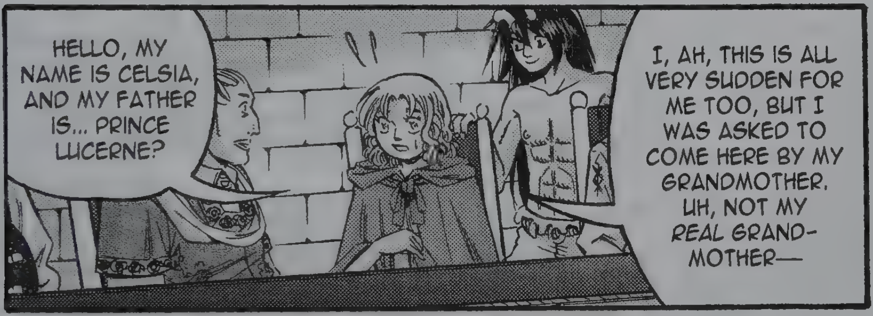
Briar Rose's eyes darted in his direction, but she said nothing. Sir Warren bowed again, before quickly excusing himself to do his duty.

'And now, councillors,' Briar Rose announced. 'We have a *special* person with us right now, who can explain everything. Someone you would all do well to listen to.'



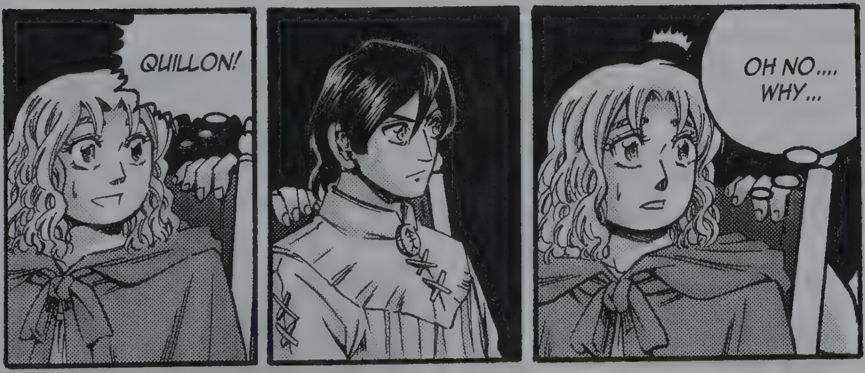
‘Oh, did I say me?’ Pylus said cheerfully. ‘No, what I really meant was *her*.’ On the word *her*, he gave Celsia’s shoulder’s a friendly clap with both of his hands. Celsia almost jumped out of her chair, as all eyes in the room turned towards her.

Oh no, she thought, her heart pounding. She had been cobbling together some semblence of a speech in her head, but Pylus’ interruption had caused all the words to flee her mind. *Stupid Pylus!*

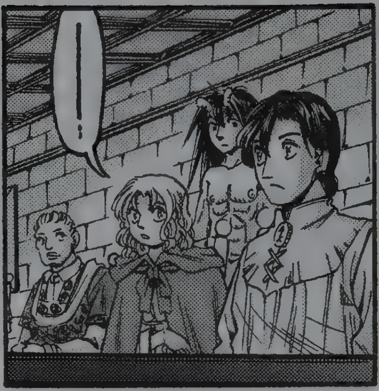

HELLO, MY NAME IS CELSIA, AND MY FATHER IS... PRINCE LUCERNE?
I, AH, THIS IS ALL VERY SUDDEN FOR ME TOO, BUT I WAS ASKED TO COME HERE BY MY GRANDMOTHER. UH, NOT MY REAL GRANDMOTHER—

The seconds ticked by. Her mouth was dry, the words catching in her throat as her mind drew a blank. Her explanation was half-baked and confusing, as she tried to leave out details of her absentee werewolf father, her own werewolf heritage, which meant she had to change her story on how and why she had to leave her village—

Of course! Quillon! Perhaps Quillon can help her!

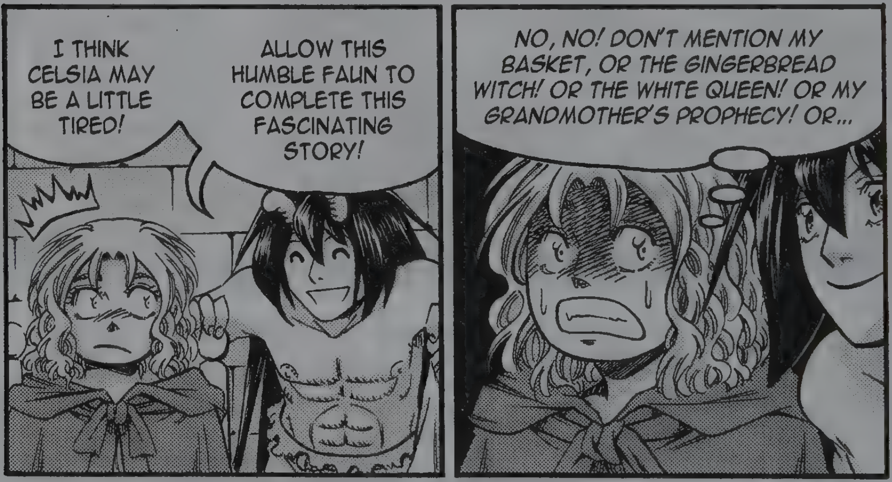

QUILLON!
OH NO.... WHY...

She knew that look. A casual observer might not be able to see the storm clouds gathering on his normally placid face, but she could sense the disturbance in his mood. A word would not soon pass his lips.

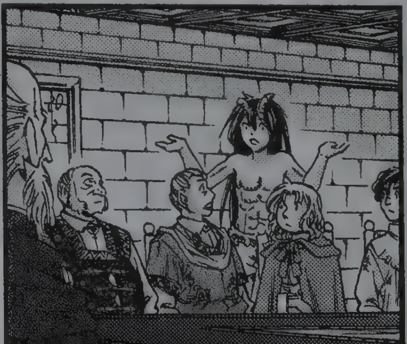


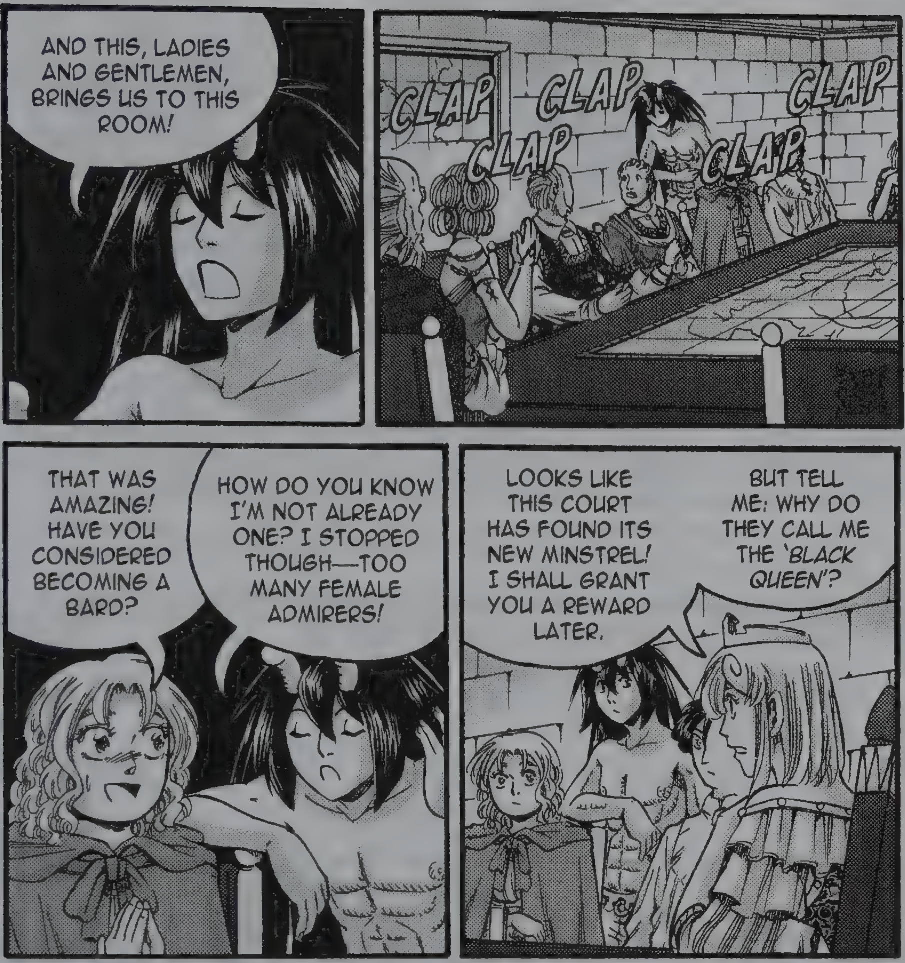
Quillon didn't like any of the people here. Not Briar Rose, Tormay or any of the assembled lords. She didn't know why, but she knew that his darker moods were always accompanied by stubbornness and the silent treatment. Asking Quillon to help her corroborate her story was pointless now, but at least he wouldn't contradict what she said.

An awkward pause now permeated the room. A lord yawned, while the others looked at each other, and then back at Briar Rose. The queen's frown seemed to deepen, until a cheerful voice sounded.


I THINK CELSIA MAY BE A LITTLE TIRED!
ALLOW THIS HUMBLE FAUN TO COMPLETE THIS FASCINATING STORY!
NO, NO! DON'T MENTION MY BASKET, OR THE GINGERBREAD WITCH! OR THE WHITE QUEEN! OR MY GRANDMOTHER'S PROPHECY! OR...

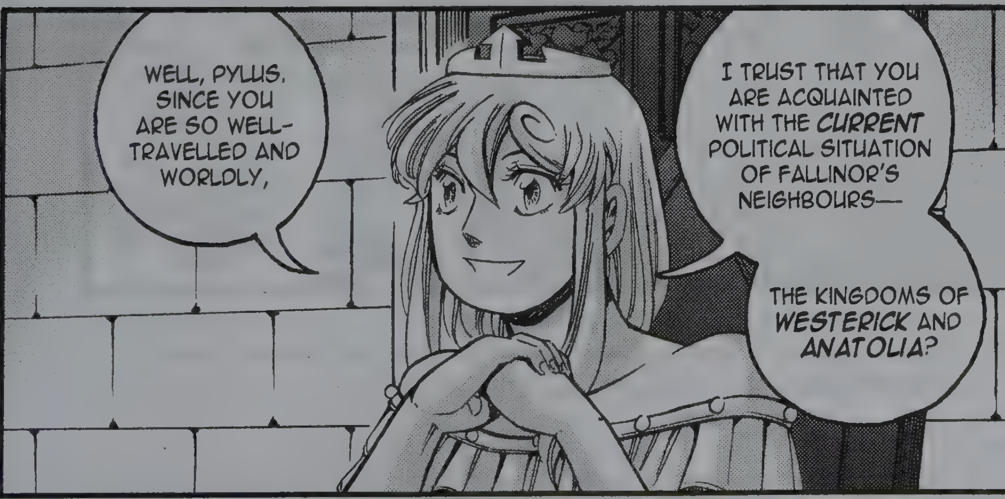
He didn't. Instead, the narrative that came was one of a carefree but luckless faun who stumbled onto two brave humans on a noble quest. Moved by the fair maid Celsia's desire to free her grandmother's kingdom from a powerful enchantment, the faun agreed to accompany them as their guide. Through countless travails and hardships, they finally succeeded in this difficult but monumental task.

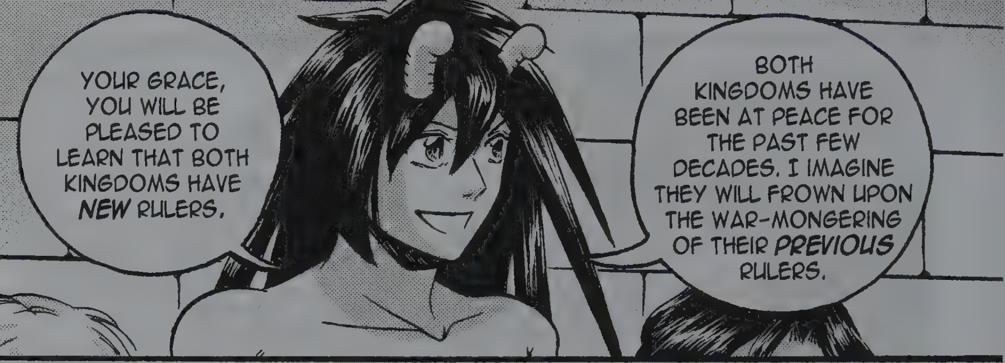



AND THIS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, BRINGS US TO THIS ROOM!
CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP
THAT WAS AMAZING! HAVE YOU CONSIDERED BECOMING A BARD?
HOW DO YOU KNOW I'M NOT ALREADY ONE? I STOPPED THOUGH—TOO MANY FEMALE ADMIRERS!
LOOKS LIKE THIS COURT HAS FOUND ITS NEW MINSTREL! I SHALL GRANT YOU A REWARD LATER.
BUT TELL ME: WHY DO THEY CALL ME THE '*BLACK QUEEN*'?

Pylus didn't miss a beat. 'It's because of the '*Black Wall,*' your grace. The hundred-foot wall that protected this kingdom during its sleep.'

Celsia side-eyed Pylus. *So no more misbehaving little faunlets?*


WELL, PYLUS. SINCE YOU ARE SO WELL-TRAVELLED AND WORLDLY,
I TRUST THAT YOU ARE ACQUAINTED WITH THE *CURRENT* POLITICAL SITUATION OF FALLINOR'S NEIGHBOURS—
THE KINGDOMS OF *WESTERICK* AND *ANATOLIA*?

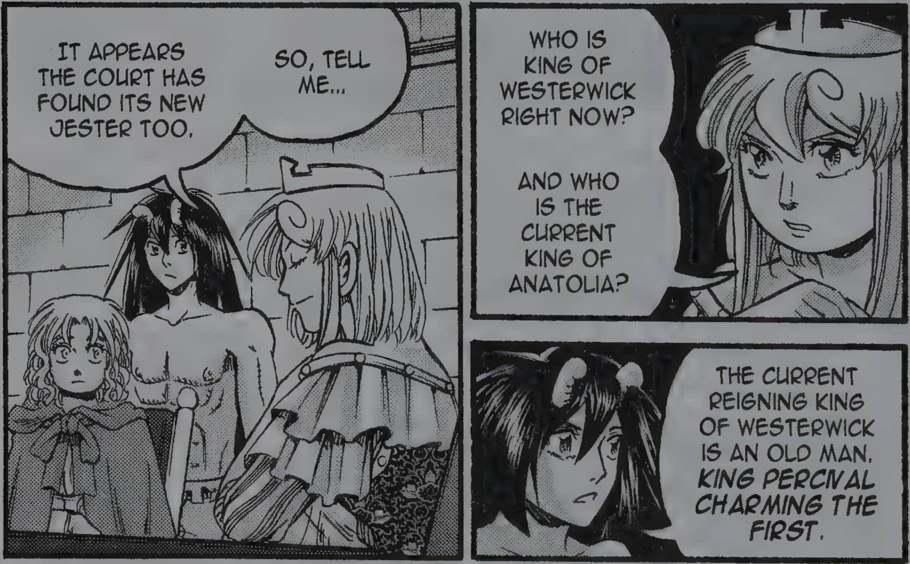

YOUR GRACE, YOU WILL BE PLEASED TO LEARN THAT BOTH KINGDOMS HAVE *NEW* RULERS.
BOTH KINGDOMS HAVE BEEN AT PEACE FOR THE PAST FEW DECADES. I IMAGINE THEY WILL FROWN UPON THE WAR-MONGERING OF THEIR *PREVIOUS* RULERS.

Pylus gave a languid wave of his arms. 'I'm just a lowly faun who keeps strictly out of human politics, but I can understand the shock of waking up in a foreign, hostile land after sixty years of enchanted sleep. If I were a king or a prince leading an invading army that had such a misfortune befall them, I would leave *immediately* to see to it that my throne is safe and sound.'

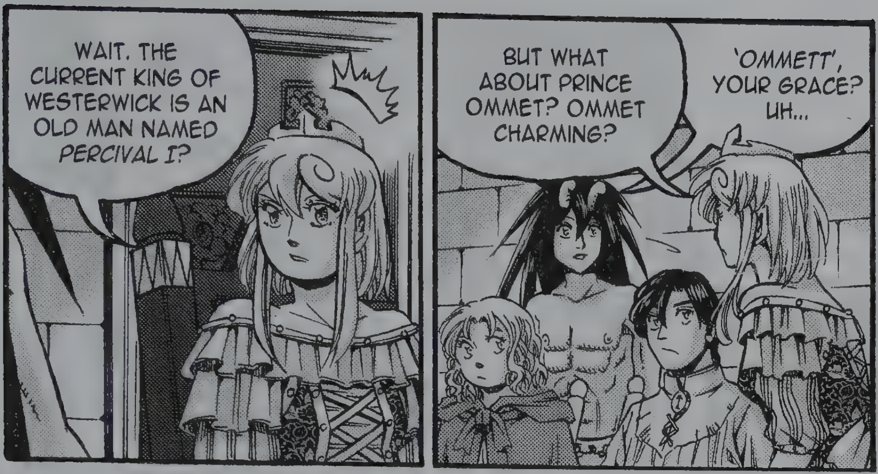
Tormay, at this point, made an appreciative grunt. 'If I may say so, Young Pylus, you are rather clever for a faun.'

Pylus' reply was equally appreciative. 'Thank you, Lord Tormay. And I find *you* rather animated for an 800 year-old mummified corpse!'

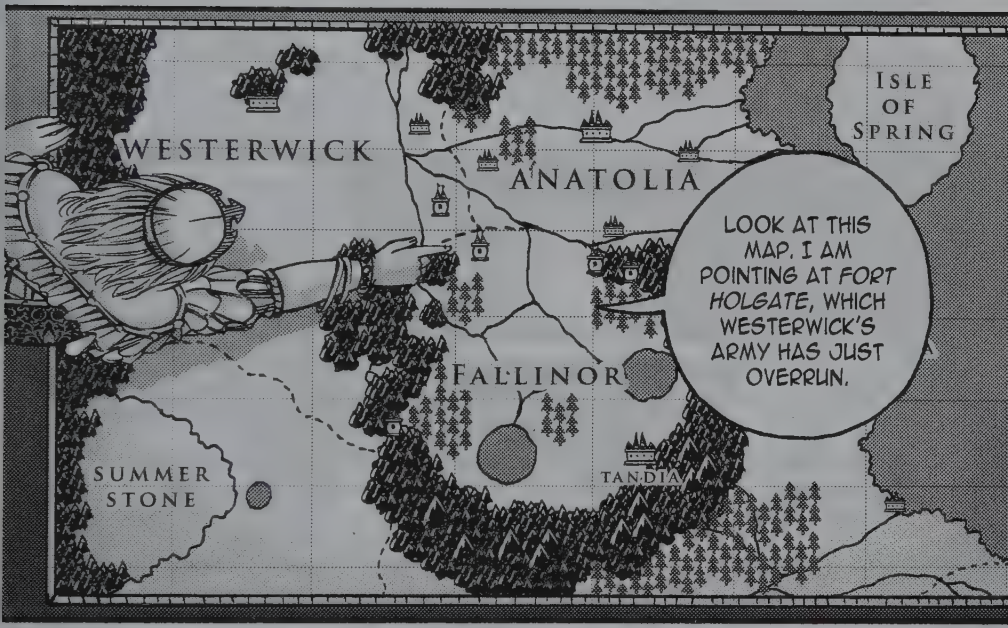
The queen snorted, as if stifling a laugh. A disquieting murmur, tinted with a little sourness, rippled through the room.


IT APPEARS THE COURT HAS FOUND ITS NEW JESTER TOO.
SO, TELL ME...
WHO IS KING OF WESTERWICK RIGHT NOW?
AND WHO IS THE CURRENT KING OF ANATOLIA?
THE CURRENT REIGNING KING OF WESTERWICK IS AN OLD MAN. *KING PERCIVAL CHARMING THE FIRST*.

Pylus then pointed at the map on the table. 'As for the king of Anatolia, perhaps I'd best explain with this map.'

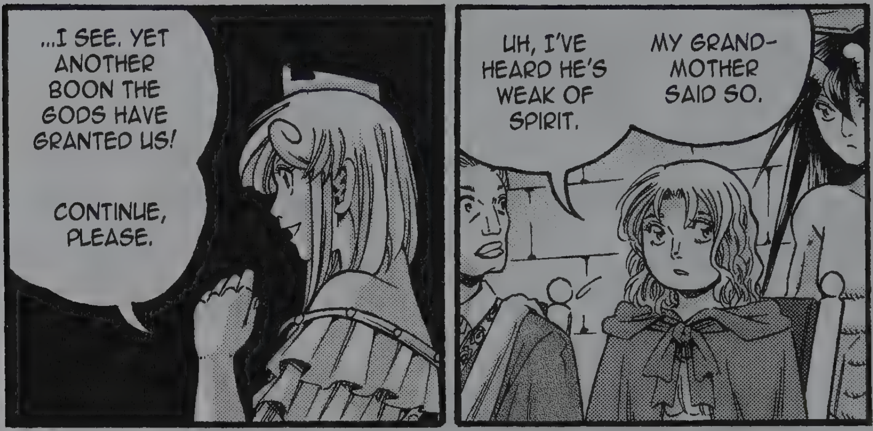

WAIT. THE CURRENT KING OF WESTERWICK IS AN OLD MAN NAMED *PERCIVAL I*?
BUT WHAT ABOUT PRINCE OMMET? OMMET CHARMING?
'*OMMETT*', YOUR GRACE? UH...

'Ah, I see. Let me explain,' said Briar Rose.


WESTERWICK
ANATOLIA
ISLE OF SPRING
FALLINOR
SUMMER STONE
TANDIA
LOOK AT THIS MAP. I AM POINTING AT *FORT HOLGATE*, WHICH WESTERWICK'S ARMY HAS JUST OVERRUN.

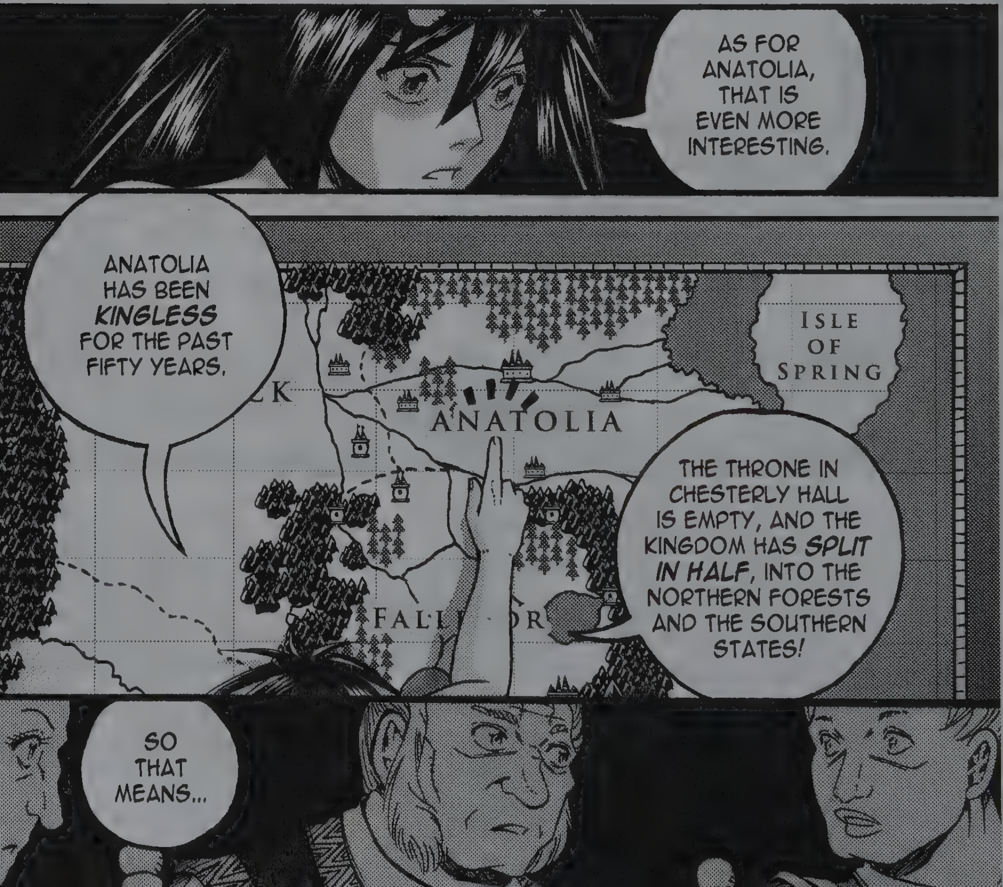
The queen continued, jabbing her finger at the little castle symbol. 'The Westerens are led by their crown prince Peredur Charming, who is married and has a young son named Omett. The child should be the same age as my Lucerne by now. Why isn't Omett on the throne of Westerwick? Unless he died young, or is weak of constitution.'

'I... do not know, your grace.' For the first time, Pylus' voice wavered with uncertainty. 'I've never heard of any King Omett. Not to my knowledge, and not in the last sixty years.'

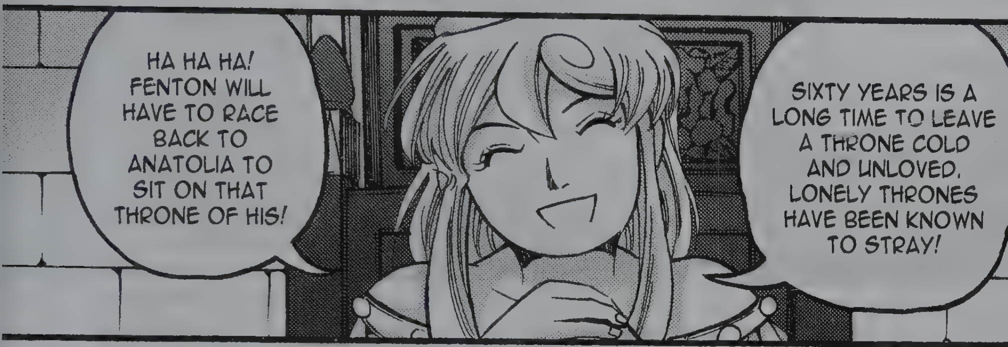

...I SEE. YET ANOTHER BOON THE GODS HAVE GRANTED US!
CONTINUE, PLEASE.
UH, I'VE HEARD HE'S WEAK OF SPIRIT.
MY GRANDMOTHER SAID SO.

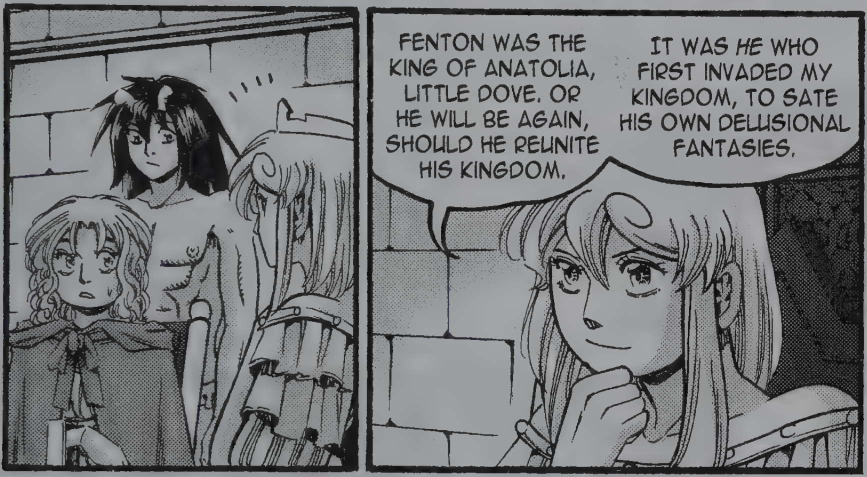
'Who? Prince Omlette?' Tormay replied in an exasperated voice. 'Overcooked in that fairy woman's womb? Is anyone here surprised?' He shrugged with nonchalance, and the rest of the room with him.

So even princes can become inconsequential in a heartbeat, Celsia thought. She seethed a little at being brushed aside, even as she found the political discussion fascinating.


AS FOR ANATOLIA, THAT IS EVEN MORE INTERESTING.
ANATOLIA HAS BEEN KINGLESS FOR THE PAST FIFTY YEARS.
K
ANATOLIA
ISLE OF SPRING
FAL
R
THE THRONE IN CHESTERLY HALL IS EMPTY, AND THE KINGDOM HAS SPLIT IN HALF, INTO THE NORTHERN FORESTS AND THE SOUTHERN STATES!
SO THAT MEANS...

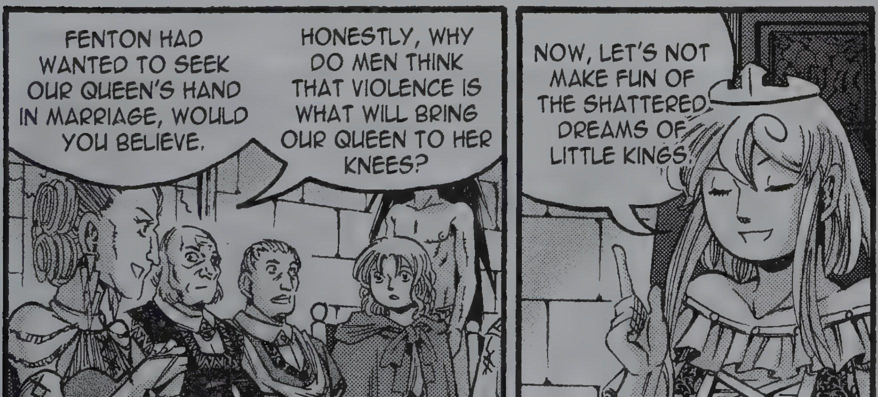
The room erupted into cheers and whoops. Even Tormay looked pleased, stroking his straggly beard with his bony fingers.

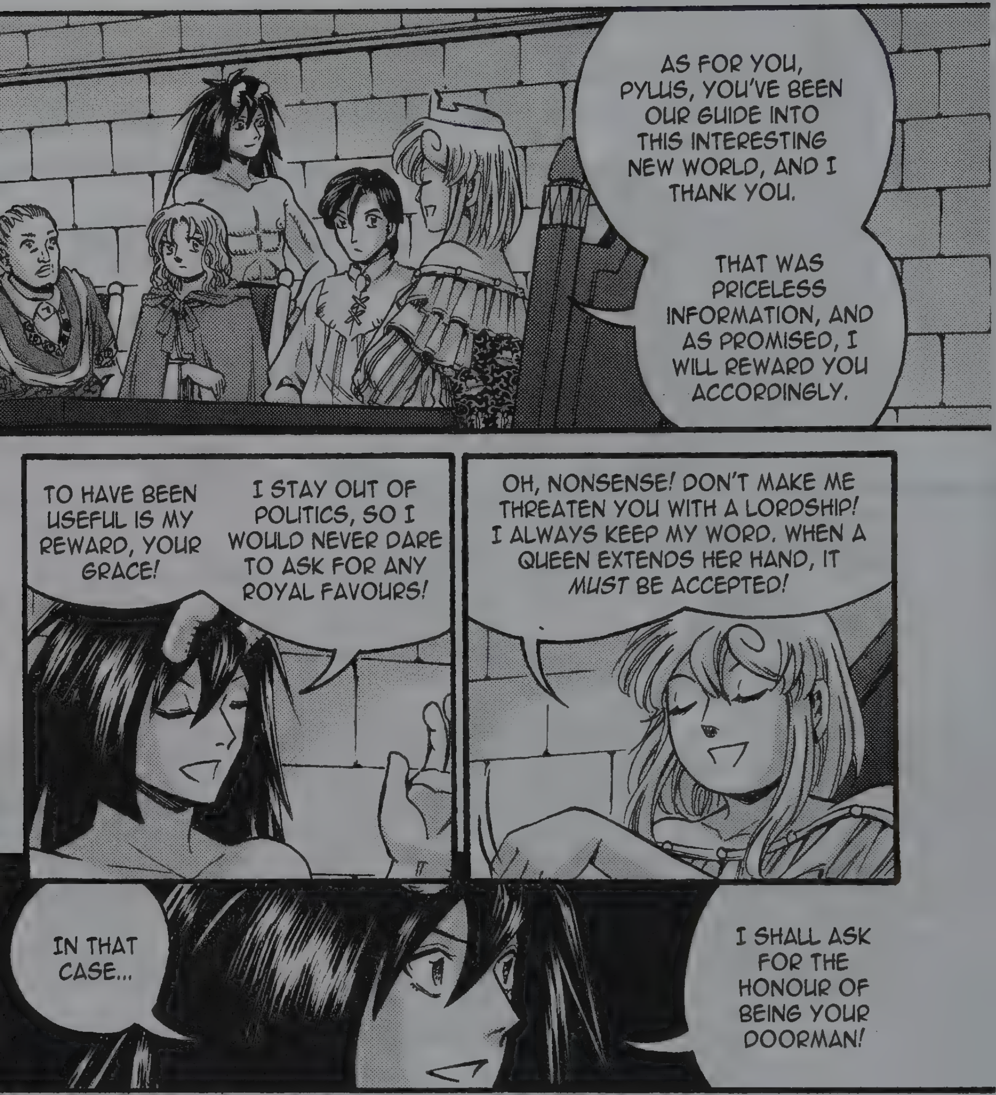

HA HA HA! FENTON WILL HAVE TO RACE BACK TO ANATOLIA TO SIT ON THAT THRONE OF HIS!
SIXTY YEARS IS A LONG TIME TO LEAVE A THRONE COLD AND UNLOVED. LONELY THRONES HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO STRAY!


FENTON WAS THE KING OF ANATOLIA, LITTLE DOVE. OR HE WILL BE AGAIN, SHOULD HE REUNITE HIS KINGDOM.
IT WAS *HE* WHO FIRST INVADED MY KINGDOM, TO SATE HIS OWN DELUSIONAL FANTASIES.

'A fitting end to that pompous fool,' Tormay snorted. 'He'll be fleeing Fallinor with his backside leading and his tail between his legs.'

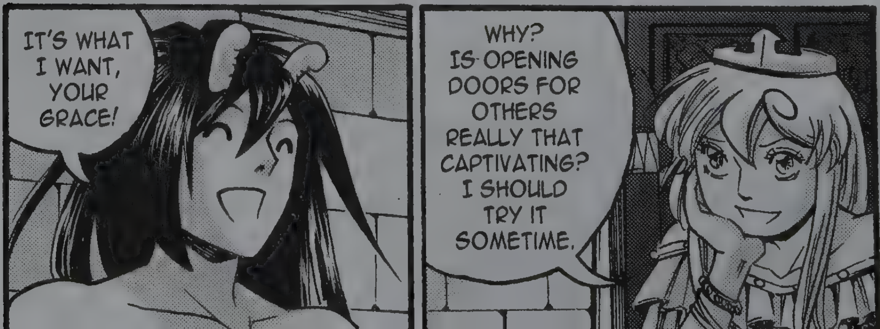
But wouldn't that only encourage him to try and seize more land from Fallinor? Celsia wondered, before dismissing the thought. She didn't feel she had the depth of knowledge the others did.


FENTON HAD WANTED TO SEEK OUR QUEEN'S HAND IN MARRIAGE, WOULD YOU BELIEVE.
HONESTLY, WHY DO MEN THINK THAT VIOLENCE IS WHAT WILL BRING OUR QUEEN TO HER KNEES?
NOW, LET'S NOT MAKE FUN OF THE SHATTERED DREAMS OF LITTLE KINGS.


AS FOR YOU, PYLUS, YOU'VE BEEN OUR GUIDE INTO THIS INTERESTING NEW WORLD, AND I THANK YOU.
THAT WAS PRICELESS INFORMATION, AND AS PROMISED, I WILL REWARD YOU ACCORDINGLY.
TO HAVE BEEN USEFUL IS MY REWARD, YOUR GRACE!
I STAY OUT OF POLITICS, SO I WOULD NEVER DARE TO ASK FOR ANY ROYAL FAVOURS!
OH, NONSENSE! DON'T MAKE ME THREATEN YOU WITH A LORDSHIP! I ALWAYS KEEP MY WORD. WHEN A QUEEN EXTENDS HER HAND, IT *MUST* BE ACCEPTED!
IN THAT CASE...
I SHALL ASK FOR THE HONOUR OF BEING YOUR DOORMAN!

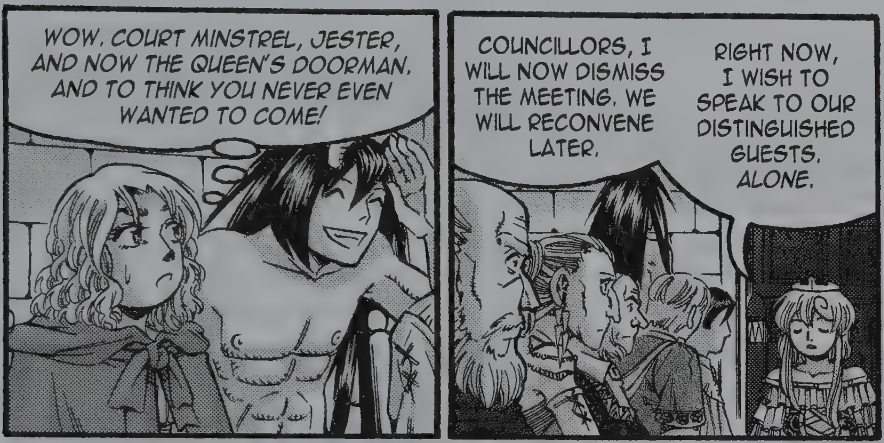
Briar Rose blinked, her voice rising in a half-laugh of disbelief. 'My doorman? To open my doors? I threaten you with a lordship, and you threaten me with a doormanship? That's hardly fair.'

'Your grace...' Lord Tormay said nervously, his eyes narrowing.


IT'S WHAT I WANT, YOUR GRACE!
WHY? IS OPENING DOORS FOR OTHERS REALLY THAT CAPTIVATING? I SHOULD TRY IT SOMETIME.

'It's captivating enough, but it's honour and reputation I seek. Your legend is widely known and admired on the Isle of Spring, your grace. All the faunlets there have heard stories of your bravery and prowess in battle!'

Briar Rose gave a girlish laugh. 'What sixty years of sleep can do for one's reputation! Why, I should have stayed sleeping for two hundred years. Your wish is granted, though you'll have to share your shift with my guards. I'm sure you will entertain them well enough.'

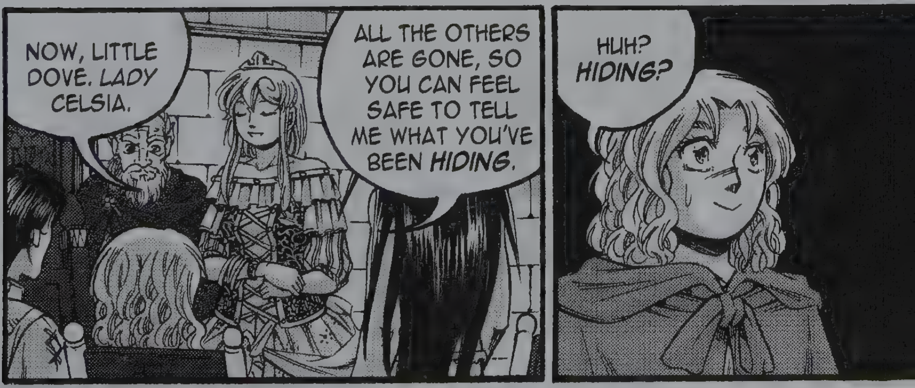

WOW. COURT MINSTREL, JESTER, AND NOW THE QUEEN'S DOORMAN. AND TO THINK YOU NEVER EVEN WANTED TO COME!
COUNCILLORS, I WILL NOW DISMISS THE MEETING. WE WILL RECONVENE LATER.
RIGHT NOW, I WISH TO SPEAK TO OUR DISTINGUISHED GUESTS. ALONE.

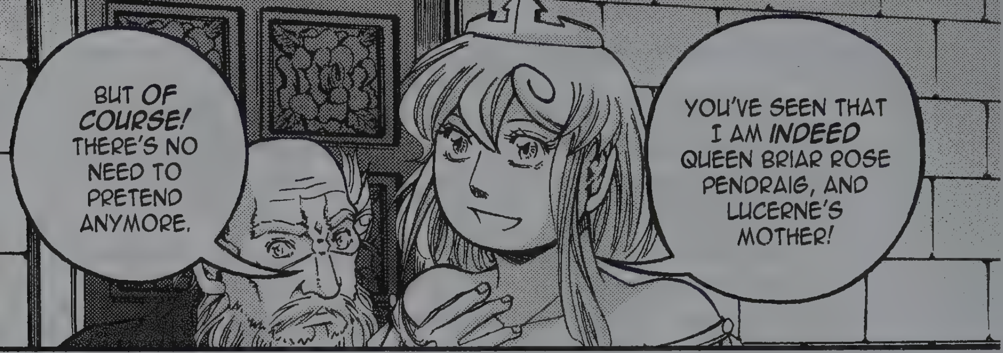
Alone apparently meant with Lord Tormay present. As the lords and ladies gathered themselves up and left the meeting room, the door swung open to reveal half a dozen burly palace guards standing outside at a respectful distance. They were armed with swords, and they bowed when they saw their queen appear briefly in the frame.

Why are there so many of them? Celsia thought. *When did they come? Did Lord Tormay bring them when he came in?*

'They don't trust us one bit, do they?' Quillon whispered under his breath. He sounded slightly surly, and Celsia turned to stare at him.

Given the situation, Quillon, they are right not to.

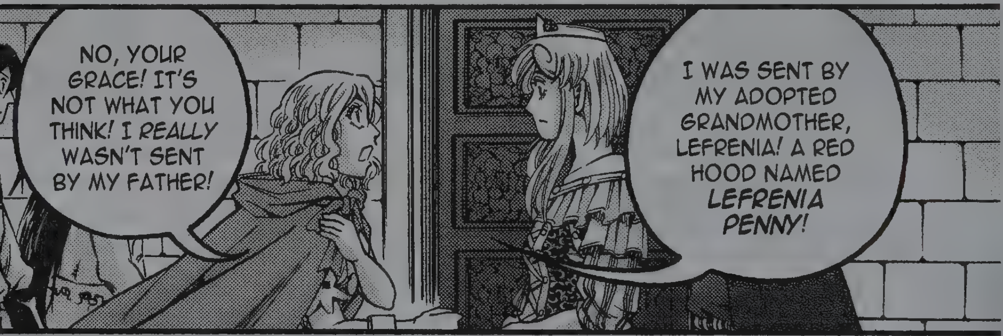

NOW, LITTLE DOVE. LADY CELSIA.
ALL THE OTHERS ARE GONE, SO YOU CAN FEEL SAFE TO TELL ME WHAT YOU'VE BEEN *HIDING*.
HUH? *HIDING?*

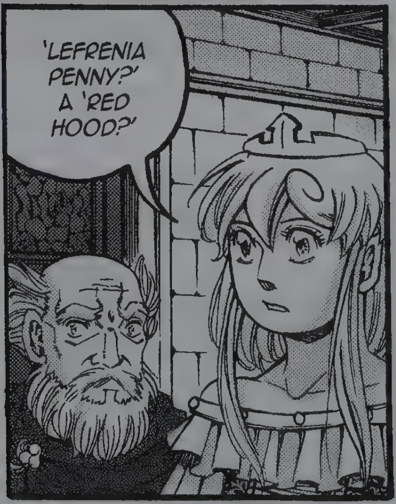

YOU'VE SEEN THAT I AM *INDEED* QUEEN BRIAR ROSE PENDRAIG, AND LUCERNE'S MOTHER!
BUT OF *COURSE!* THERE'S NO NEED TO PRETEND ANYMORE.

'I can see that Lucerne has taught you well, and I am very pleased by that, and by your performance. I can attest that this room is sound-proof, and even so, only the most trusted of my soldiers are standing guard outside. Now tell me, what do my dear Lucerne and Andal have planned? Certainly, they must have an army raised by now, and gold to fill my coffers?'

Fear struck Celsia's heart. She had an inkling of what the queen was referring to, but Briar Rose was *so* far off-base that trying to bluff or lie about the situation could be disastrous.

Wait, is this why there are so many soldiers outside?

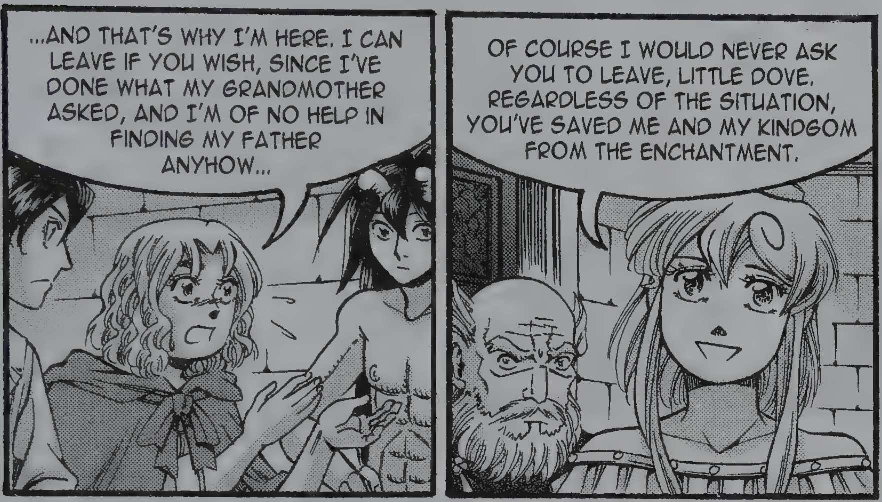

NO, YOUR GRACE! IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK! I REALLY WASN'T SENT BY MY FATHER!
I WAS SENT BY MY ADOPTED GRANDMOTHER, LEFRENIA! A RED HOOD NAMED *LEFRENIA PENNY!*


'LEFRENIA PENNY?' A 'RED HOOD?'

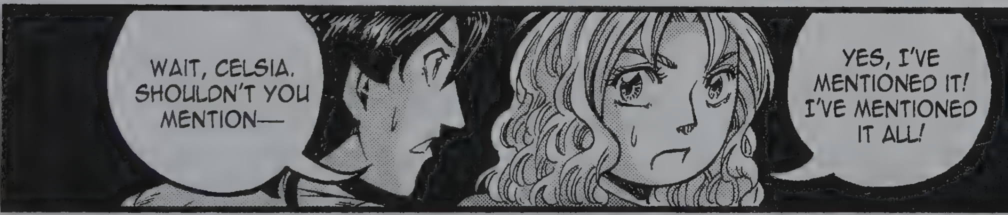
'I... do not know of any Lefrenia Penny,' said Briar Rose. She turned to Tormay, who shook his head. This only deepened the queen's frown.

'Please, your grace, I'm nowhere near as clever as you think!' Celsia cried, increasingly desperate. 'I don't have the wits to lie, or hide anything from you! I don't know why Grandmother Penny sent me here, but I came because I wanted to honour her request!'

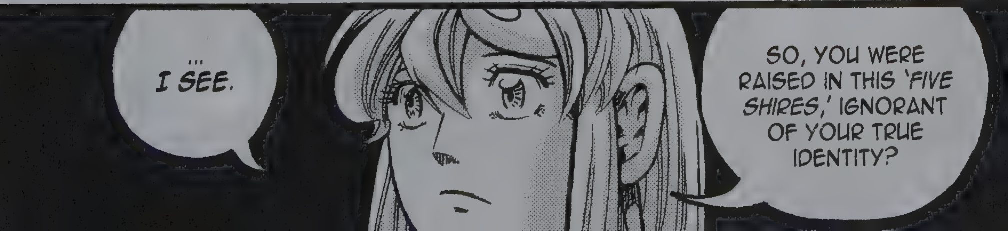
Out it came, all the unflattering details of her childhood that she had hoped to spare Briar Rose. The death of her mother, the absentee father, and the jolly stepmother who raised her to be ignorant of her heritage. As she spoke, she could see the queen's expression grow dark, while the features of Lord Tormay's face twisted into a scowl.

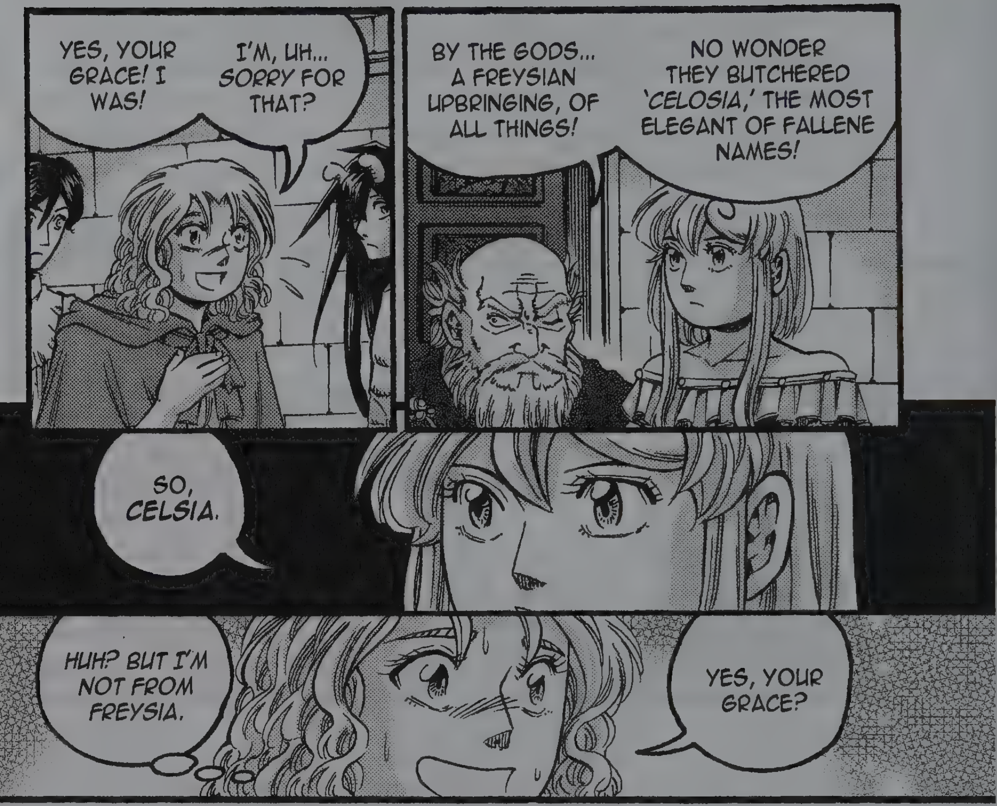

...AND THAT'S WHY I'M HERE. I CAN LEAVE IF YOU WISH, SINCE I'VE DONE WHAT MY GRANDMOTHER ASKED, AND I'M OF NO HELP IN FINDING MY FATHER ANYHOW...
OF COURSE I WOULD NEVER ASK YOU TO LEAVE, LITTLE DOVE. REGARDLESS OF THE SITUATION, YOU'VE SAVED ME AND MY KINGDOM FROM THE ENCHANTMENT.

'Thank you, your grace!' Celsia cried with a smile of relief. 'You *must* know that I am only telling the truth! My father *is* called Lucerne, even if I've not seen him for years! And I truly *am* your granddaughter, the daughter of your son!'


WAIT, CELSIA. SHOULDN'T YOU MENTION—
YES, I'VE MENTIONED IT! I'VE MENTIONED IT ALL!

Everything, but her werewolf heritage, her sighting of Lucerne the day before her grandmother sent her on her quest, and *her magical hamper*. The hamper, especially, she was determined to keep a secret. If the kingdom was still under threat from two armies, there was no telling what they may demand of her when they find out its powers.


... I SEE.
SO, YOU WERE RAISED IN THIS 'FIVE SHIRES,' IGNORANT OF YOUR TRUE IDENTITY?


YES, YOUR GRACE! I WAS!
I'M, UH... SORRY FOR THAT?
BY THE GODS... A FREYSIAN UPBRINGING, OF ALL THINGS!
NO WONDER THEY BUTCHERED 'CELOSIA,' THE MOST ELEGANT OF FALLENE NAMES!
SO, CELSIA.
HUH? BUT I'M NOT FROM FREYSIA.
YES, YOUR GRACE?

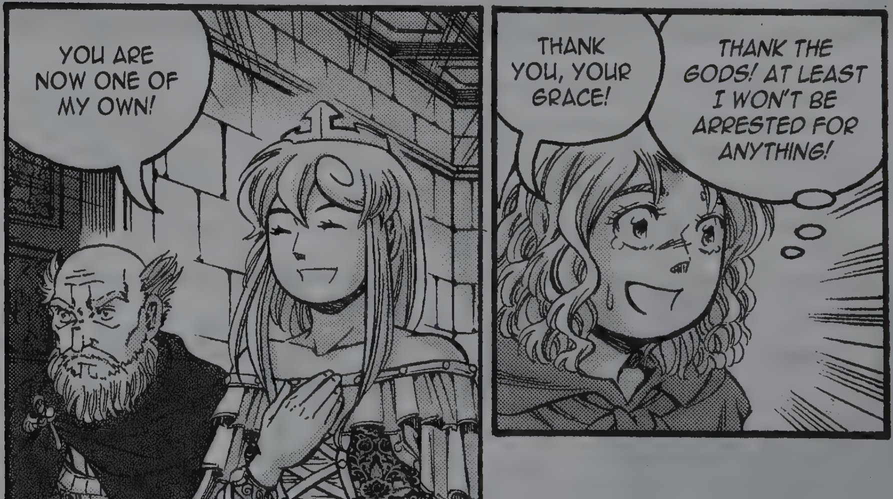
'Have you told me the *whole* truth?'

'Yes, your grace,' Celsia replied. 'I've told you the truth.'

'And you swear by that?'

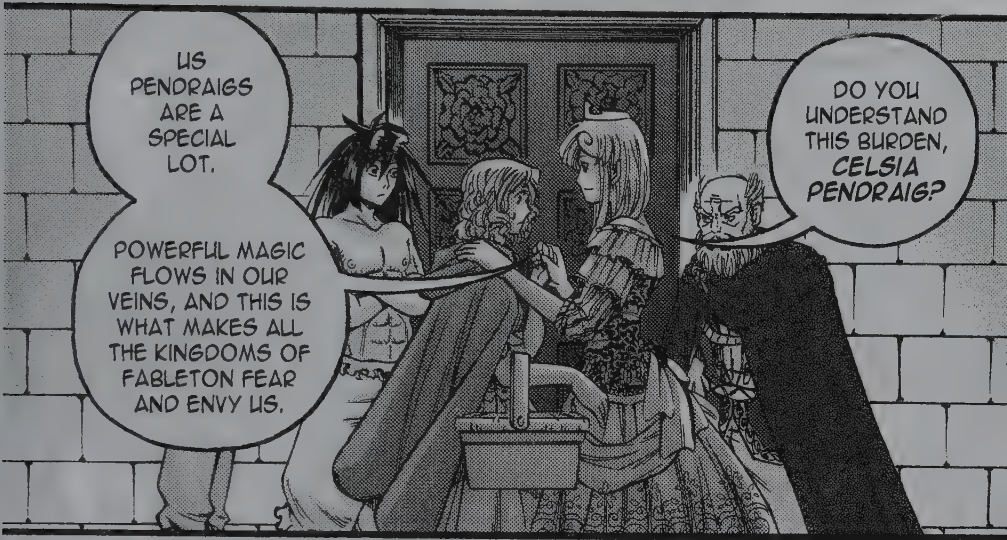
'...I swear by what I've said, your grace.'

'Then I welcome you as the newest member of my house! As the daughter of my son, Prince Lucerne Pendraig, the first of his name!


YOU ARE NOW ONE OF MY OWN!
THANK YOU, YOUR GRACE!
THANK THE GODS! AT LEAST I WON'T BE ARRESTED FOR ANYTHING!

'However.'

The word sounded like an ominous drum. The queen walked forward with that radiant smile on her face, making the room seem to shrink and the air to compress. She stopped in front of Celsia, scooping up her hand and giving it an affectionate squeeze.

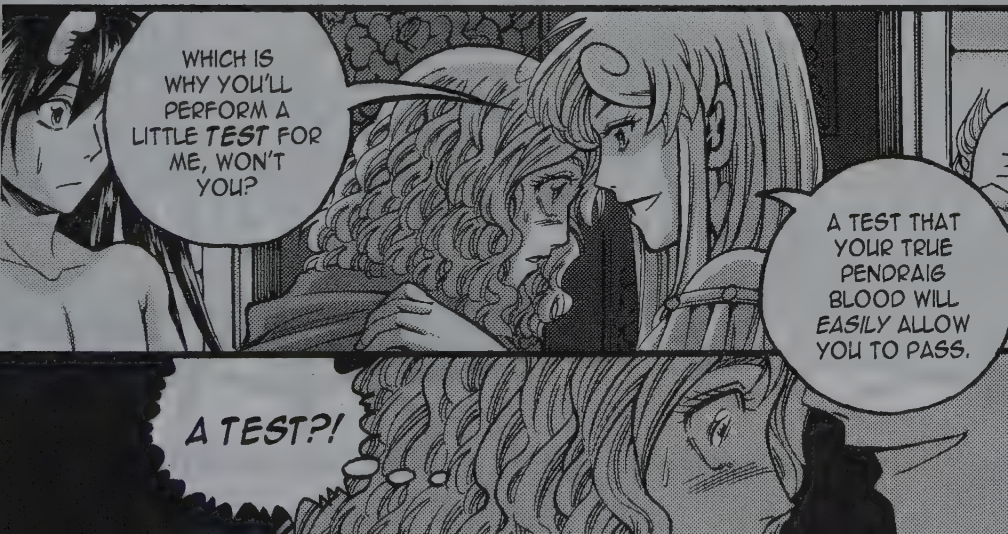

US PENDRAIGS ARE A SPECIAL LOT.
POWERFUL MAGIC FLOWS IN OUR VEINS, AND THIS IS WHAT MAKES ALL THE KINGDOMS OF FABLETON FEAR AND ENVY US.
DO YOU UNDERSTAND THIS BURDEN, *CELSIA PENDRAIG?*

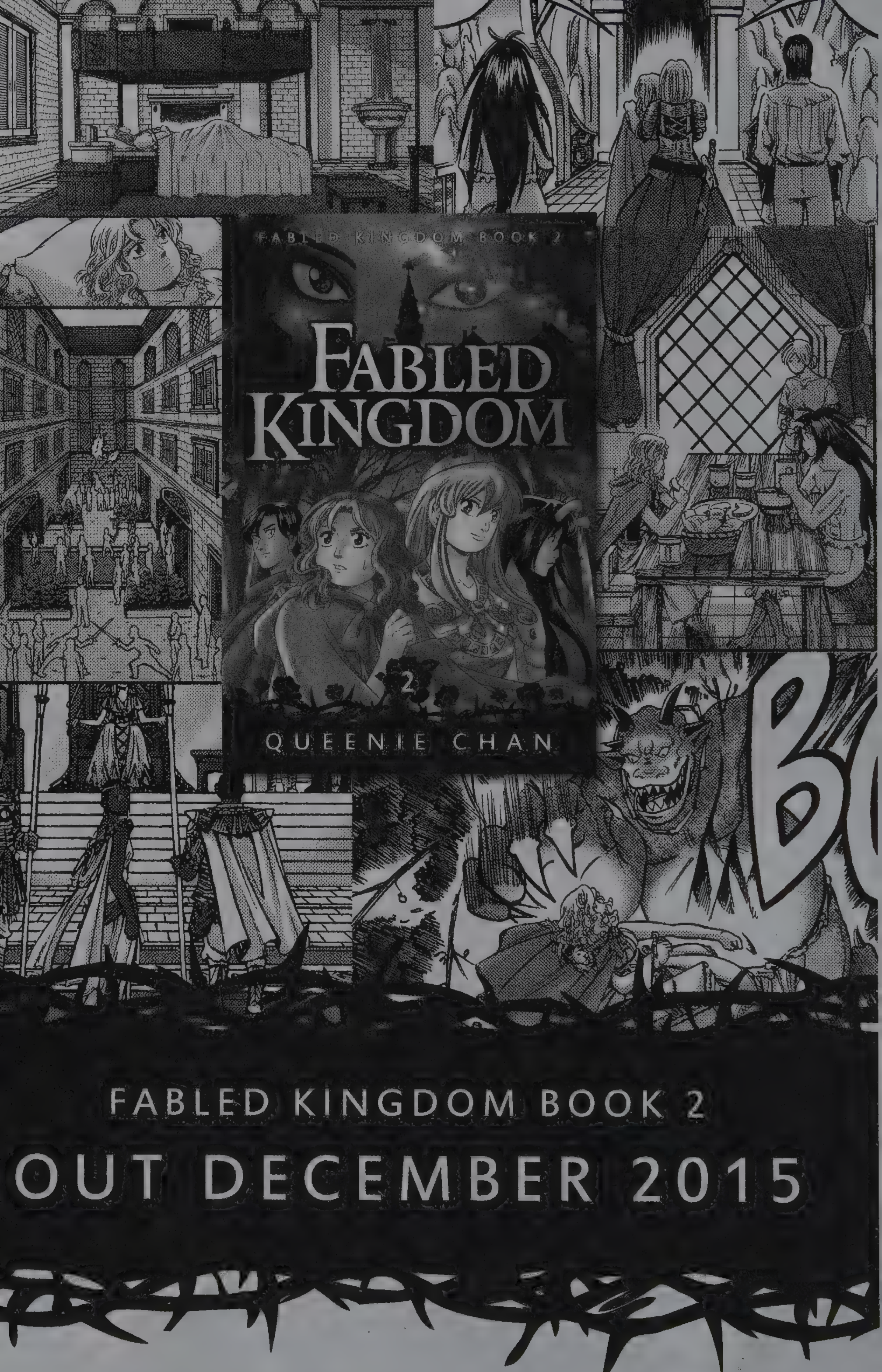
'I... will try my very best,' Celsia stammered. 'Your grace.'

'It is because of his burden, this prestige, this *greatness that becomes an encumbrance*, that it is considered a terrible, *terrible* crime to falsify something like this. Those of Pendraig blood, that is.'

'Your grace! I would never even think—'

'Of course you would never, little dove.'


WHICH IS WHY YOU'LL PERFORM A LITTLE *TEST* FOR ME, WON'T YOU?
A TEST THAT YOUR TRUE PENDRAIG BLOOD WILL *EASILY* ALLOW YOU TO PASS.
A TEST?!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About the Author

Originally born in Hong Kong, *Queenie Chan* is a manga-style comic book artist and graphic novelist based in Sydney, Australia. Her first professionally-published work was *The Dreaming* series, and since then, she has worked with best-selling authors Dean Koontz (*In Odd We Trust, Odd is on Our Side, House of Odd*) and Kylie Chan (*Small Shen*) on graphic novel prequels to their work.

She is currently working on the next book in the *Fabled Kingdom* series. You can also read a lot of her short stories on her website.

You can contact her on her website: *www.queeniechan.com*

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What if Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother
isn't her real grandmother?
What if her two true born grandmothers are both Queens -
and one is *good*, while the other one is *evil*?

Celsia is a 'Red Hood,' a young healer training under her grandmother in a small village deep in the woods. Life is ordinary and uneventful, until a shocking truth is uncovered - her grandmother isn't her *real* grandmother.

Forced to flee her village, Celsia soon finds herself on a quest to seek her two trueborn grandmothers - both powerful queens of magical kingdoms. Accompanied by her childhood friend Quillon and the cheeky faun Pylus, her destination is the fabled kingdom of *Fallinor*, which was destroyed over 60 years ago... or was it?

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